

ETHICS AND JUSTICE NEEDS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Keywords: Development, sustainability, justice, ethics, environmentalism, environmental justice, anthropocentrism, ecological rationality, World Conservation Strategy, Brundtland Report, *Agenda 21*, women and development, WID, WAD, GAD, WED, WCD, international agencies

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Summary

Development is a normative concept with ethical and justice connotations, as is the concept sustainable. “Sustainable development,” then, is a deeply contentious term that taps into these rich meanings as well as a set of ideas generated by modern environmentalism. Part of the political appeal of sustainable development is that it is vague enough to mean different things depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. Its ethical and justice content varies, for example, depending on which dimension of environmentalism is given priority. Its justice and ethical implications also vary depending on whether the environmental issues emphasized are of particular concern to the rich (intergenerational, trans-species) or the poor (distribution of impacts, access to resources, economic security).

Yet sustainable development offers a critique of narrowly anthropocentric conceptions of development. It is based on a broad, enlightened anthropocentrism that recognizes the

marriage of development, ethics, and justice within a framework of ecological rationality. Fostering an ecologically rational society requires enabling some form of ecological democracy, which is in turn dependent on justice based on ethics. These intimate interrelationships—the ethics and justice needs of sustainable development—are best demonstrated by the evolution of thinking about women and development in the developing world. Environmental ethics and environmental justice are part of the package that sustainable development must be understood to be if it ultimately is to make any sense.

1. Sustainable Development, Environmentalisms, and Justice

Sustainable development is a deeply contentious term, marked by repeated attempts to salvage it and to savage it. It lends itself easily, far too easily perhaps, to the efforts of international agencies and nation-states to protect the natural resource base with the overt or covert intention of converting nature into capital. And yet it continues to offer those concerned with environmental sustainability a way of capturing the complexities and possibilities associated with a vision of a better, green future. What then is sustainable development? What do we sustain, how do we sustain it, and in what ways does this impinge on the social, political, and cultural contexts that mark all human endeavor? This article explores the multiple dimensions of sustainable development and its interlinkages with issues of social justice, ethics, and human rights.

Sustainable development is a set of ideas generated by modern environmentalism, which itself continues to consist of sometimes contentious dimensions founded in differing historical movements, ideas, and concerns of justice. Economic environmentalism originates in worries about waste, inefficiency, and the unwise use of nature and natural resources as well as the elite political control of those resources. Its ethic is contingent and utilitarian and its conception of justice is materialist. Ecological environmentalism originates in worries about preservation of nature, natural systems, and specific places and species. Its ethic tends to be based in claims of non-anthropocentric intrinsic value (biocentric, ecocentric) and its conception of justice extends to other species, specific places, and interacting natural systems such as biotic communities. Social environmentalism originates in concerns about the human environment that transcend materialist production and consumption: aesthetics, social interaction, historical and cultural heritage, psychological and physiological health, recreational opportunity, and personal security. Its ethic is human-centered and deontological and its conception of justice is based on the extension and realization of human rights. These three and other dimensions of environmentalism can and do conflict with each other as each lays a claim to the ethics and justice needs of sustainable development.

Sustainable development means different things to different people beyond the global environmental movement. Moreover, it means different things to the industrialized world and the developing world. Robert Paehlke, in a 1995 essay “Environmental values for a sustainable society,” points out that the concern with sustainability in industrial societies is “nothing less than an attempt to shift the attention of contemporary societies to the needs of future generations and to reject the assumption that technology will somehow almost automatically resolve all future resource needs.”

But this is not all that the pursuit of sustainability entails for the industrialized world. Rather, as Michael Redclift argues in a 1997 essay, “Sustainable development in the twenty-first century”: “The issue becomes not how we in the North [the industrialized world] pay our debt to nature, but, rather how many of the countries of the South [the developing world] escape from their own burden of debt to us! We need, if we are to address global inequalities, to transform our trading relations with the developing world. And we need to do this not simply because of its ecological effects, but because ‘free trade’ cannot be fair between such unequal partners. The failure to do so inevitably increases human inequalities.” We cannot, then, ignore the reality that concerns with sustainable development in the developed world, even if they manifest differently from those in the developing world, have significant implications and consequences for environmental sustainability in the developing world.

Sustainable development in the developed world also has a justice dimension, primarily manifesting in a problematic intergenerational one, rather than as a questioning of inequitable access to material sustenance. Much of the scholarly literature on justice aspects of sustainability overwhelmingly reflects this focus on future generations. A second aspect of this literature is an exploration of the obligations to non-human species, including the issue of animal rights. Both of these concerns are also found in the profusion of ecofeminist writings that emerged in the West from the 1980s. Although these are significant and critical issues, what is missing most from these analyses is a grappling with justice and sustainability along the lines of rich and poor. In contrast, the intergenerational justice and animal rights dimensions, though present in the developing world, remain hidden for the most part by the rich-poor one.

A third dimension to justice issues in the industrialized world are the environmental justice movements, such as those in the United States that have highlighted the racially discriminating concentration of hazardous wastes and polluting industries in African American, Native American, and Latino communities. These movements broadened their focus in the 1990s to include the need for environmental sustainability but they remain limited by their primary concern with what Nicholas Low and Brendan Gleeson, in the 1998 book *Justice, Society, and Nature* call “environmental equity,” meaning the equitable distribution of negative externalities. In essence, the focus of environmental justice movements in industrialized countries is primarily to improve quality of life, and not, as in the developing world, a struggle for survival through retaining control over environmental resources.

In the developing world, the challenge for states of reconciling the nationalist agenda of development with grassroots and international pressure for environmental sustainability is a risky one. It is perhaps in the nature of states to subvert the long-term need for environmental sustainability in order to ensure short-term economic security. The discourse of sustainable development, according to John Dryzek in his 1997 book *The Politics of the Earth*, “de-emphasizes national governments and state actors.” With unacknowledged philosophical roots in political liberalism, sustainable development emphasizes rights, justice, and the autonomy of individuals who act at both transnational and local levels of political organization. “Sustainable development is a discourse of and for global civil society . . . Civil society is normally defined in terms of political action and interaction not encompassed by the state.”

Yet nation-states remain the site for justice and redistribution and hence remain the focus of environmental and social justice movements that mark the developing world terrain. It is in this context that we have to see Arturo Escobar's call in an essay with Wendy Harcourt, "Conversations towards feminist futures," for the death of development, so fundamentally opposed does he see development to the goals of "gender and social equality, material justice, and sustainability." Less radical perhaps are the views of other writers of the developing world for whom sustainable development is tied fundamentally to issues of social justice and equity. The struggles of the poor in the developing world are, in the words of Juan Martinez-Alier in the 1997 essay "Ecology and the poor": "ecological movements . . . in that their objectives consist in obtaining ecological necessities for existence" such as food, energy, water, and so on. The developing world people's struggles for social and political equity, thus, are reflective of broader concerns with ecological justice. They serve to challenge the complicity of nation-states with the agents of global capital through their efforts to retain control over their traditional resource base, claim their political rights, and put issues of self-determination and autonomy on the agenda of national development.

2. The Meaning of Development

The pursuit of development is usually understood as the pursuit of economic growth. The categorization of the world into "Third World" and "First World," developing and developed countries, industrializing and industrialized, and such other terms is fundamentally grounded in a notion of development as an economic state of being. The developing world has been cast in the role of seeking to get to an elusive level of affluence achieved by the developed world. One consequence of this has been that the *goal* of getting to "development" has effectively resulted in ignoring the *process* of getting there. Equally problematic has been the limitation of our understanding of development to something confined to the economic sphere. Indeed, under the influence of neo-liberal economic policies advocated by institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), both development and economic growth are seen as synonymous with the presence of the so-called free market. It is this idea that underpins the cascade of economic reforms since the 1990s aimed at sweeping away other forms of economic systems in eastern Europe and much of the developing world.

What is markedly absent in this formulation of development is any appreciation of the broader issues of justice and freedom that ought to drive development efforts. The project of development takes on urgency not because it can or ought (merely) to facilitate the functioning of markets but because it may be one tool in overcoming widespread problems such as poverty, malnutrition, infant mortality, oppression, denial of political, civil, social, and economic rights to individuals and groups, environmental destruction, and the survival and agency of women. The overwhelming presence of these problems that exist in both the developed and developing worlds is perhaps the starkest testament to the centrality of justice and freedom on the development agenda. Without a commitment to justice, the presence of social evils (be it the starvation of people or the enslavement of children, or the structural inequities present in all societies) will be taken to be the unfortunate consequences of a still-to-be-perfected free market system, if not the fault of those who suffer thus. Without a commitment to a

comprehensive set of freedoms that all individuals must enjoy (including freedom from hunger, poverty, and oppression, for example), our vision of development will remain stunted. At another level, development in its most positive manifestation is about deep enjoyment of the best aspects of culture and civilization—achievement in autonomy, the arts, aesthetics, human relationships and fulfillment, and intellectual and emotional enrichment, for example. In the words of Lewis Mumford in his 1940 book *Faith for Living*: “The final test of an economic system is not the tons of iron, the tanks of oil, or the miles of textiles it produces: The final test lies in its ultimate products—the sort of men and women it nurtures and the order and beauty and sanity of their communities.” Justice and freedom are essential to all of these and economic security is important as a means.

Quite clearly, economic growth in a country and increased affluence of individuals ought not to be ends in themselves—they are means to something else, perhaps best described as well-being. It is when growth and affluence become ends in themselves, as much of the modern industrialized world demonstrates, that we find societies characterized by mindless consumerism. Jacques Ellul’s “technological society” is one such world in which whether something is done is determined more by whether it *can* be done rather than by careful deliberation of whether it *should* be done. Indeed, the history of economics reveals an early concern with quality of life and substantive freedoms that has more recently given way to a narrow focus on utilities, incomes, and wealth. Amartya Sen’s works may be seen as a way of getting development economics back on track to grapple with the idea of freedoms, which in *Development and Freedom* he defines broadly as “political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security.”

Development, according to Sen, is about freedoms—the freedom that manifests in individuals leading the kind of lives they value and the freedom especially of opportunities to achieve what they would like. Thus, unlike traditional understandings of development as economic growth, for Sen it is about both processes and opportunities. In addition, he recognizes that such freedom that constitutes development in any real sense involves political and civil rights; economic growth “cannot sensibly be taken as an end in itself.” Clearly, Sen strays far from the hegemonic direction that neo-liberal economics has set in defining development as essentially about income generation (for individuals) and the functioning of free markets. Indeed, Sen’s work restores an ethical and humane dimension to understandings of economic development, focusing as he does on issues of justice, women’s agency, culture, and human rights. Yet, despite this, he fails to grapple in any significant way with the nature of *sustainable* development, ignoring thereby issues of environmental protection and the sustainable, equitable use of environmental resources.

Sen’s works provide a welcome contrast to mainstream development economists who have found it difficult to get away from the abstractions (and attractions) of modeling and quantitative analyses that, albeit significant in their own right, do not go very far in bringing into focus the relationship between humans and the non-human environment. Indeed, there may well be political grounds for such distancing from the natural environment. Sen, for example, in his well-known study of the Great Bengal famine in India in 1943 that killed around three million people, points out that the famine, far

from being caused by any significant decline in food availability, can be attributed to a series of policy decisions by the colonial British administration. The famine was a direct consequence of the failure to recognize a shift in exchange entitlements and a deliberate decision of the British government not to break the famine by allowing more food imports into the public distribution system.

In their 1989 work *Hunger and Public Action*, Jean Dreze and Sen argue: “Famine is, by its very nature, a social phenomenon (it involves the inability of large groups of people to establish command over food in the society in which they live) but the forces influencing such occurrences may well include, *inter alia*, developments in physical nature (such as climate and weather) in addition to social processes.” Sen emphasizes that irrespective of the cause of a famine, its impact on a population is dependent on how the society is organized, its social and economic policies, and political factors that all determine to a large degree what people can produce or consume. Dreze and Sen point out: “Blaming nature can, of course, be very consoling and comforting. It can be of great use especially to those in positions of power and responsibility.” To argue in this context that we should look at environmental factors would undoubtedly detract from the human agency that was responsible for the famine.

Yet, even in his work on gender and cooperative conflicts and gender and justice, Sen rarely looks beyond the individual to take into account in any way human-nature relationships. For example, in his 1990 essay “Gender and cooperative conflicts,” Sen focuses on the links between perception, well-being, and agency that deeply influence women’s existence. He argues for the need “to distinguish between the *perception* of interest (of the different parties) and some more *objective* notion of their respective well-being. Focussing on the ‘capabilities’ of a person—what he or she can *do* or can *be*—provides a different approach to a person’s well-being.” By *agency*, Sen is referring to a person’s willingness to act or pursue certain goals. He points out that “a person may have various goals and objectives other than the pursuit of his or her well-being.”

As an illustration of what development can constitute, he points to “getting better education, being free to work outside the home, finding more ‘productive’ employment, and so on.” It is in this context that he speaks of human capabilities as the necessary focus of development (and perhaps we would not challenge that in itself) but, like most political and economic liberals, he fails to recognize that the human potential he speaks about is grounded in the larger context of the human-environment relationship. Can we talk about the need for women’s employment or education without addressing what kinds of employment or the nature or purpose of the education? In a 2001 essay “Liberalism and the political,” Susan Liebell notes: “The relationship between humans and nature is *not* outside the parameters of justice precisely because justice requires the physical world as its material base.” Thus, Sen’s works offer serious economic analyses that seek to grapple with seeming intangibles such as the freedom of individuals to achieve and their capabilities to function. They also recognize the significance of a sound theory of justice in understanding and theorizing development. But by their very anthropocentrism, they fall short of offering a sustainable vision of development.

To critique Sen’s narrowly anthropocentric writings, however, is not to argue that the alternative is to speak from a position of non-anthropocentrism. Rather, what is needed is an enlightened, modest anthropocentrism—the kind of anthropocentrism that can

champion justice and freedom but can also accept and embrace human dependence on, and adaptation to, nature. It is this that constitutes the possibility of an ecologically rational society—one where commitment to ethics, justice, and human rights is meshed with a commitment to environmental sustainability. Such a society would have in place the processes, institutions, and systems that allow for this coming together of justice and human rights concerns, on the one hand, with protection of nature and the environment, on the other. It is this notion of ecological rationality that underpins our understanding of the ethics and justice requirements of sustainable development.

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