

Chapter 22

International Development and Sustainability

Rimjhim M. Aggarwal

Abstract This chapter explores some global development challenges – such as that of extreme poverty, growing inequalities, and poor governance, from the perspective of sustainability. We begin by questioning what we mean by “development” and tracing the evolution of this concept from the monolithic vision of development as a linear process that characterized postcolonial era thinking on development policy to that of “sustainable development” and the current thinking in terms of development as a highly contested term. We then examine some of the major challenges at the interface of international development and sustainability, such as the need to delink resource-intensive growth from progress on human development indicators. This discussion then leads us on to exploring some of the innovative solution options that have been proposed by central planners as well as grassroots level searchers and the usefulness of different approaches, such as randomized control trials, to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions. We conclude with a discussion of some open issues, such as the potential of human rights-based thinking about development and its implications for sustainability.

Keywords Sustainable development • Poverty • Human development • Governance • Human right

1 Development and Sustainability: Reflections on Key Themes and Trends

We generally understand “development” as a process of progressive change from “lower” to “higher” states. For biological organisms, this is easy to define as a linear process from childhood to adulthood. For societal evolution, what is meant by “higher,” and what is meant by “lower”? Is this even a linear process? Who defines it?

R.M. Aggarwal (✉)
School of Sustainability, Arizona State University, PO Box 875502, Tempe,
AZ 85287-5502, USA
e-mail: Rimjhim.aggarwal@asu.edu

From ancient times, philosophers, historians, and ordinary people have pondered over these questions. Ancient cultures embodied a diversity of values that shaped their visions about societal and human progress. What we understand by development today has been shaped largely by what Gunnar Myrdal, in his monumental work, *Asian Drama*, described as the “modernizations ideals” (Myrdal 1968). These ideals, rooted in Western Enlightenment, included the drive toward rationality in decision-making (seen as liberation from the hold of traditions and customs), application of scientific knowledge to increase material production, and control of nature in order to more efficiently service human needs. These ideas that originated in Europe shaped the process of industrialization in the Western world from the eighteenth century on.

After the Second World War, attention shifted to the former colonized nations in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, which were seen as “poor” and “uncivilized.” The big question for development practitioners was how to get these nations to the same stage of “development” as the Western industrialized world. These efforts were based on the assumption that there was a universal, linear trajectory that each had to travel. Foreign aid and technology transfers were thought to be the elixirs. To date, trillions of dollars in foreign aid have been pumped into the world’s poorest countries, yet around 1.1 billion people still live in extreme poverty and about one-sixth of the world’s population is unable to meet their basic needs. Instead of convergence on a common path, we observe that differences among countries have widened. The income gap between the world’s richest (20 %) and its poorest (20 %) increased from a ratio of 30:1 in 1960 to 60:1 in 1990 and widened further to 74:1 in 1997 (Pogge 2002: 265).

Given these trends, we have come to the realization that the universalist model of development based on a resource-intensive path of industrialization is unsustainable. We have to rediscover what “development” truly means and collectively envision our possible future states and how to navigate toward those that are socially desirable. The World Commission on Environment and Development famously put one such vision forward in 1987, in its pioneering manifesto, *Our Common Future*. The Commission coined the term “sustainable development” and defined it as meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987:43). This definition brought issues of inter-generational equity to the forefront and underscored the idea that “development” is a highly contested term, and thus, negotiations and deliberations are critical.

More recently, sustainability science – with its emphasis on complexity, nonlinear dynamics, systems analysis, and futures (Kates et al. 2001; Wiek et al. 2011; Miller et al. 2014) – has offered new ways of thinking about core development problems, reimagining the future, and transformational change. Development studies and sustainability science originated as separate fields with different motivations, worldviews, and methodologies; yet it is obvious that sustainability without a vision of development has no meaning and development without being sustainable has no relevance. The field of development with its (a) focus on core human development

values, poverty alleviation, justice, diversity of cultures, and institutions and (b) accumulated evidence on trajectories of socioeconomic development and a vast repertoire of field experiments has a lot to offer to advance sustainability science, as we explore in this chapter.

- **Task:** *What is your vision of a “developed” country? Develop a set of criteria for how to reliably distinguish a “developed” country from a “less developed” or “underdeveloped” country?*

2 Key Challenges at the Intersection of Development and Sustainability

2.1 *Delinking Realization of Human Development Goals from Resource-Intensive Growth*

The grand challenge of sustainability is often framed in terms of meeting the *needs* of a growing population – projected to reach 9.5 billion by 2050 – while maintaining the planet’s life support systems and living resources (Kates and Parris 2003). An important underlying concept here is that of human needs, which, as Amartya Sen reminds us, gives a rather “meager view of humanity” (Sen 2004). He argues that “we are not only *patients*, whose needs demand attention, but also *agents*, whose freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue it can extend far beyond the fulfillment of our needs” (Sen 2004). Following from the work of Sen and others, a popular way to measure human development has been through the use of the Human Development Index (HDI), which is a summary measure of standards of living, education, and health (UNDP 1992).

Several researchers have attempted to relate the HDI to measures of sustainability in order to better understand the challenge of sustainable development. Neumayer (2012), for example, related HDI values for 1980–2006 to a measure of ecological footprint (EF) per capita. WWF (2008) estimates the globally available biocapacity to be 2.1 global hectares per person and categorizes countries with per capita EF greater than 2.1 ha as unsustainable. Using this measure, Neumayer found that *all* the countries with high and very high levels of HDI are not sustainable due to carbon dioxide emissions per capita that are far in excess of the natural absorptive capacity of the atmosphere. Thus, he argues “one of the biggest challenges of this century will be severing the link between high to very high levels of human development and strong unsustainability, particularly in the form of unsustainably high carbon dioxide emissions” (p. 576). This delinking will require an out-of-the-box rethinking of our developmental trajectory. Tragically, we do not have any good examples of countries that have been able to meet this challenge, although some have done better than others (Neumayer 2012).

2.2 The Devil is in the Distribution: The Challenge of Intra- and Intergenerational Equity

Many people would argue that the problem is not so much the overall limited availability of resources in relation to global population level, but more so about how these resources, and incomes, are distributed. The challenge is not just that of poverty, but that of poverty amidst growing islands of affluence, of deprivation with growing overconsumption. Besides raising several ethical issues, high inequality leads to social conflicts and lowers the incentive to invest in the future, specifically the future of the poor (Easterly 2001). This further exacerbates the cycle of growing poverty, inequality, and unsustainable resource use that needs to be addressed (Aggarwal 2006).

The ethical issues that are raised by these glaring rates of intragenerational inequities are also linked to intergenerational equity issues; sometimes, these complement each other, but they are often in conflict. Thus, for instance, an important question relates to whether redistribution to today's poor harms the future by enhancing current consumption spending and reducing investment for the future. Anand and Sen (2000) argue that this is not necessarily the case if assisting the poor helps them build up human capital, which will then also benefit the future. However, it is worth noting that not every policy will yield this double dividend for both intragenerational and intergenerational equity. For instance, there are growing concerns that increased spending on reducing greenhouse gas emissions will take financial resources away from assisting those who are currently poor (World Bank 2009). There are no easy answers here. An open and honest discussion of the complementarities and conflicts between these issues of inter- and intragenerational equity is urgently needed.

2.3 Unresponsive States and the Lack of Effective Participation: The Challenge of Governance

As we argued earlier, both development and sustainability demand deliberation and negotiations. However, in several developing countries, war, conflict, and failed states represent major threats to a sustainability transition (Kates and Parris 2003). At its peak in 1992, one-third of the countries of the world were ravaged by armed conflicts (Gurr et al. 2001). Armed conflicts threaten sustainability directly by destroying human lives, as well as infrastructure, and indirectly by encouraging exploitation of natural resources. Moreover, under conflict conditions, personal security issues dominate concerns for the common good and the thinking about the future (Kates and Parris 2003).

While armed conflicts get a lot of public attention, rampant corruption and rent seeking within large bureaucratic structures are other chronic problems that plague several developing countries and make the state largely unresponsive to the needs of

its citizenry. Even in developing countries with representative democracies, there remains a large gap between formal legal rights in the civil and political arena and the actual capability to practice those rights effectively as citizens. There are two dimensions to this problem, as Heller (2009) observes: “On the one hand, there is the problem of *how* citizens engage the state. State-society relations in the developing democracies tend to be dominated by patronage and populism, with citizens having either no effective means of holding government accountable (other than periodic elections) or being reduced to dependent clients. On the other hand, there is the problem of *where* citizens engage the state. [...] Given that local government is often absent or just extraordinarily weak in much of the developing world, there are in fact very few points of contact with the state for ordinary citizens” (Heller 2009: 7).

Thus, it is not surprising, as Heller argues, that democracies in much of the developing world are characterized by both participatory failures (who participates and how they participate) and substantive failures (translation of popular inputs into concrete outputs). A poignant example here is the case of the metropolitan region of Mumbai, which has a population of over 20 million, but local bodies within the city are not accountable to the needs of local citizenry, such as protecting them against the vulnerabilities of monsoon flooding. The planning and management of basic services falls under various ministries that have statewide responsibilities and constituencies, as opposed to an elected body of local representatives who are responsive to local needs. Phatak and Patel (2005) examine how this lack of capacity and autonomy at the local level impacted the recovery effort during the 2004 floods in Mumbai and how the response may have been different under a more decentralized form of governance.

In the next section, we discuss examples of solutions that have evolved to address the challenges discussed above.

- **Task:** *Instead of convergence on a common path, as originally envisaged by economic theorists, we observe that differences among countries have widened since the start of industrialization. Why do you think this has happened? What implications might these differences have for global sustainability?*

3 Solution Options

To some, the challenges outlined above may paint a picture of gloom; to others, these represent possibilities. Paul Polak, a social entrepreneur who belongs to the latter group, eloquently describes the possibilities as follows: “Working to alleviate poverty is a lively, exciting field capable of generating new hope and inspiration [...]. Learning the truth about poverty generates disruptive innovations capable of enriching the lives of rich people even more than those of poor people” (Pollak 2009: ii).

The field of development has indeed been very lively and has inspired a wide range of solution seekers, who can be broadly classified into two categories: Planners and Searchers (Easterly 2007). Notable among the Planners is Jeffrey Sachs, who believes that the poor are caught in a trap and lack the minimum amount of capital necessary to get a foothold on the economic ladder, and so the richest countries need to make the investments necessary to give the poor countries “a boost up to the first rung” (Sachs 2006:244). The Planners thus advocate for the “big push” approach, which requires massive efforts in planning and coordination, as well as financing through foreign aid.

This paternalistic aid-giving approach, as traditionally practiced by Planners, has been critiqued by William Easterly (2007), who advocates instead for the Searchers’ approach, which he contrasts with that of the Planners (see Box 22.1).

Planners as well as Searchers have offered several solutions. An interesting example, which somewhat reconciles the approaches of the two groups, is the “procedural” solution of public participation. For example, Brazil has made significant strides in using public participation successfully to address the complex challenge of poverty, corruption, and lack of accountability (see Box 22.2).

Box 22.1: In Search of Solutions: Planners Versus Searchers

“Planners announce good intentions but don’t motivate anyone to carry them out; Searchers find things that work and get some reward. Planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them; Searchers accept responsibility for their actions. Planners determine what to supply; Searchers find out what is in demand. Planners apply global blueprints; Searchers adapt to local conditions. Planners at the top lack knowledge of the bottom; Searchers find out what the reality is at the bottom. Planners never hear whether the planned got what it needed; Searchers find out if the customer is satisfied” (Easterly 2007: 6).

Box 22.2: Participatory Reforms in Brazil

Significant participatory reforms in Brazil came in the form of the creation of various sectoral councils (e.g., in health, transport, education, environment) that were mandated by the constitution. The councils include representatives from sectoral interests, government, and civil society, thus creating “institutionalized spaces” for participatory action. The most significant of these local experiments has been *participatory budgeting*, which involves direct involvement of citizens at the neighborhood and city level in shaping the city’s capital budget. Over 400 Brazilian cities have now adopted some form of participatory budgeting (Heller 2009).

Given that poverty alleviation is a complex process, with several interacting factors, it has not always been clear what works and what doesn't. One way of testing the effectiveness is through conducting a randomized control trial (RCT). Under the RCT method, the target population is split randomly into two parts: the treatment and control groups. The treatment group receives the treatment, while the control group receives a placebo. After enough time has elapsed for the treatment to work, results are compared between the control and treatment groups.

The RCT approach is now being widely adopted to test for alternative ways to reduce poverty. For instance, the microfinance agency BRAC, which has traditionally focused on giving small loans, decided to give assets, such as a few chickens, a cow, and a pair of goats, to the poor in the state of West Bengal in India. They also gave them training on how to take care of the animals and manage their finances. To test the results of the project, a team led by Esther Duflo compared the treated households with a random control group that did not get these assets.¹ The researchers found that, long after the treatment had ended, the treated groups ate 15 % more, earned 20 % more, and saved significantly more. These effects could not be explained by the direct effects of the treatment in terms of the extra earning from selling eggs, meat, and milk. The researchers argued that more than just the assets, the intervention gave the treated households "hope" for a better future. This may explain why the treated group worked harder – 28 % more – than the control group. The experiment helped clarify how lack of optimism may be an important reason why the poor are trapped in poverty and why small but carefully designed interventions, by offering help, can start a virtuous circle.

The RCT method has helped dispel several myths about the poor and the process of poverty alleviation. However, the approach also has several pitfalls. The fundamental problem is that it may not always be possible to create randomly selected control and treatment groups. An example here is the case of tourism programs which are selectively launched in specific sites with certain desirable characteristics. Finding reasonable alternative sites as controls may be difficult. In other cases, even if control and random sites can be identified, carrying out a selective intervention may not be politically feasible. Often, it may not be deemed ethical to deny project benefits to a section of the people. Finally, we need to keep in mind that, in field settings as opposed to laboratory settings, it may often be difficult to isolate the treatment and control groups. Social and economic interactions between groups may often be difficult to control, thus leading to spillovers (Taylor and Lybbert 2012). The main lesson here is that, just as there are multiple solutions, there are alternative approaches for evaluating impacts that need to be considered. Specifically in cases where society-wide effects of a complex nature are being evaluated, other statistical and sometimes qualitative approaches (such as narratives) may be helpful.

¹“Hope springs a trap: An absence of optimism plays a large role in keeping people trapped in poverty,” *The Economist*. May 12, 2012.

- **Task:** Paul Polak (2009) has argued that “learning the truth about poverty generates disruptive innovations capable of enriching the lives of rich people even more than those of poor people” (p. ii). Provide some examples of disruptive innovations that have transformed the lives of not only the poor but also the rich.

4 Open Issues

The solution options discussed above offer hope, but are these enough? The transition to sustainability cannot be complete without meeting at least the basic needs of the poor and, beyond needs, providing for their voices to be heard and upholding human dignity. Are we headed in the right direction toward this transition? Current trends suggest that the gap between have and have-nots is expanding and that struggles over natural resources are likely to intensify as we head precariously close to the planetary boundaries and face the threat of climate change. In such an environment, how can we guarantee that basic human development goals will be met and sustained? Whose responsibility is it?

In response to this challenge, several people have proposed that what is needed is an explicit normative approach that transforms the traditional thinking about poverty alleviation as “aid” or an “act of charity” to the framing of “freedom from poverty” as a “human right” that is guaranteed by law. As Irene Khan of Amnesty International vehemently argues, “human rights are claims that the weak advance to hold the powerful to account, and that is why poverty is first and foremost about rights” (Khan 2009: 21). Others opposed to this thinking have taken the view that rights can be effectively articulated only in combination with correlated duties and associated responsible parties; otherwise, the demands for human rights can be seen as just loose talk. Sen (2000: 203), on the other hand, argues that the “framework of rights-based thinking extends to ethical claims that transcend legal recognition. These rights can thus be seen as being prior (rather than posterior) to legal recognition. Indeed, social acknowledgement of these rights can be taken to be an invitation to the State to catch up with social ethics.”

What does all this mean in terms of development action and practice? As Haglund and Aggarwal (2011) explain, rights seem to offer leverage that “development” alone has lacked in terms of providing “new discursive, normative, and morally compelling mechanisms that transcend framings of poverty in terms of neediness and charity and instead embrace the idea of firm obligations and the inalienability of rights.” They show, through several cases, how rights-based thinking can powerfully shape behavior when backed by a range of accountability mechanisms. The process of rights-based policy formulation is not just an abstract idea; it is well underway in several countries. In a recent survey, Gauri (2004) found that, in a sample of 165 countries with written constitutions, 116 made reference to the right to education and 73 made reference to the right to health care. Rights to food, water, sanitation, and a clean environment have also been recently added to several constitutions.

Box 22.3: Social Guarantees for Fulfillment of Basic Needs

A “Social Guarantee” can be defined as a set of legal or administrative mechanisms that determines specific entitlements and obligations and ensures the fulfillment of those obligations on the part of the state. Social Guarantees have been instituted in a number of developing countries and cover a range of basic entitlements such as health (Chile, Peru), education (Peru, Guatemala, Uruguay), employment (India), housing (South Africa), and social protection (Uruguay). A system based on guarantees requires the following key elements (World Bank 2007):

- Normative (legal) framework (embodied in the constitution or specific policies) that clearly defines the rights.
- Financial mechanisms to secure the budget.
- Specific institutional arrangements to implement, monitor, and provide oversight.

One interesting example of how rights-based thinking has permeated into public policy is through the mechanism of “Social Guarantee” (World Bank 2007) (see Box 22.3).

Several studies have shown how the mechanism of Social Guarantee has been able to successfully bridge the gap between social rights norms and concrete public policies by (1) providing an innovative institutional design that emphasizes synergy and coordination among otherwise disparate agencies, (2) contributing to reducing gaps in opportunity among citizens by promoting universal access, and (3) strengthening democratic governance by engaging all citizens in collectively setting basic entitlement levels, monitoring that agreed-upon targets are met, and providing mechanisms of redressal (see World Bank 2007, for a review).

Finally, in examining such a rights-based approach, we have to ask how well such an approach compares with a goal-based approach, as, for example, is embodied in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the UN. The MDG model sets national level targets and relies heavily on a top-down international transfer of resources, with very weak domestic and international accountability mechanisms. The Social Guarantee approach, on the other hand, delineates individual-level entitlements and relies on strong domestic accountability mechanisms but involves very limited engagement of foreign entities. This limited engagement could be a strength in cases in which this has led to development of domestic efforts at consensus building, mobilization, and accountability, but it could also be a weakness, particularly in the case of relatively poor countries, which could benefit from some foreign assistance. Thus, what may be needed to achieve human development goals is some kind of a hybrid approach, which builds on social learning – with engagement of all relevant stakeholders – about what works and under what contexts.

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