Sustainable Development: Gandhian Diagnosis and Prognosis

D. Jeevan Kumar

Modernization, Development and Environmentalism

The Sustainable Development model is a challenge to the conventional form of development. Conventional approaches see development as simply modernization of nations and people along Western lines. Modernization theories hold that the more structurally specialized a society is, the more modern and progressive it is (Pepper 1996). To be modernized, a society has to become more technically sophisticated and urbanized, and make increased use of markets for the distribution of economic goods and services. Modernization also brings social changes, including the development of representative democracy, increased mobility and the weakening of traditional elites, kinship groups and communities. Modernization is closely tied to the promotion of individual growth and self-advancement. The transformation of Nature, such as harnessing rivers to produce energy and clearing forests for agricultural production, is one of the hallmarks of modernization. (Baker 2006)

Modern environmentalism has emerged as a critique of this Western-centric development model. Environmentalism challenges many of the basic assumptions that the Western model of development makes about the use of Nature and natural resources, the meaning of progress and the ways in which society is governed.

The Sustainable Development model represents an important example of the new environmentalist approach. It seeks to reconcile the ecological, social and economic dimensions of development, now and into the future, and adopts a global perspective in this task. It aims at promoting a form of development that is contained within the ecological carrying capacity of the planet, which is socially just and economically inclusive. It focuses not upon individual advancement but upon protecting the common future of humankind. Put this way, Sustainable Development would appear to be an aspiration that almost everyone thinks is desirable. Indeed, it is difficult not to agree with the idea (Baker 2006).

The Brundtland Model of Sustainable Development

The term ‘Sustainable Development’ has been prominent in discussions about environmental policy since the mid-1980s. Following the central role it played in the United Nations (UN) appointed Brundtland Commission (1984-87) and its report, Our Common Future (WCED 1987), it has appeared with increasing frequency in academic studies and in government reports. The Brundtland formulation of Sustainable Development has come to represent mainstream thinking about the relationship between environment and development. It now commands authoritative status, acting as a guiding principle of economic and social development (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000).
The UN has played a particularly prominent role in stimulating engagement with the model of Sustainable Development. The UN has organized several world summits, including the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which took place in June 2002 in Rio de Janeiro, more famously known as the Rio Earth Summit, and subsequently, the Johannesburg World Summits on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 and 2012. The Rio Declaration, which arose from the Rio Earth Summit, provides an authoritative set of normative principles including gender equality, intra-generational equity, inter-generational equity and environmental justice. It also details the governance principles needed to deal with how to manage and organize the promotion of Sustainable Development within society, in institutions and at the political level. All this activity has advanced our understanding of what Sustainable Development means.

The Summits have also led to several internationally binding environmental agreements, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its related Kyoto Protocol, as well as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The UN engagement has also led to a proliferation of institutions and organizations, including ones within civil society and from the business community, with a remit to promote Sustainable Development, such as the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). The ‘UNCED process’ is used as a shorthand way to indicate the range of activities that have taken place under the auspices of the UN, since the publication of the Brundtland Report (Baker 2006).

In making the links between the economy, society and the environment, the Brundtland Report puts ‘development’, a traditional economic and social goal, and ‘sustainability’, an ecological goal, together to devise a new development model, that of Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development is a model of societal change that, in addition to traditional objectives, has the objective of maintaining ecological sustainability (Lele 1991). In addition, the Brundtland Report made it explicit that social and economic conditions, especially those operating at the international level, influence whether or not the interaction between human beings and Nature is sustainable.

The now famous and much popularized Brundtland definition of Sustainable Development is “development that meets of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). What is often forgotten is that Brundtland went on to argue that:

“Sustainable Development contains within it two key concepts: the concept of ‘needs’, in particular, the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.” (WCED 1987).

What is politically significant about the Brundtland Report is that it does not just address the causes of unsustainable development but also puts forward solutions or pathways to the future. This allows the concept to provide a framework for the integration of environmental policies and development strategies into a new development paradigm – one that breaks with the perception that environmental protection can be achieved only at the expense of economic development.

Critique of ‘Sustainable Development’

A critical review of the multidimensional literature on Sustainable Development reveals a lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding Sustainable Development and its complexities. A critical review shows that the definitions of Sustainable Development are vague; there is a lack of operative definitions and disagreement over what should be sustained; the concept is unclear in terms of emotional commitment; and it “remains a confused topic”, “fraught with contradictions” (Jabareen 2008).
Sustainable Development encompasses a number of serious internal flaws that must be addressed before it is widely adopted as the sole development approach (Hove 2004):

1. First of all, upon analysis of the assumptions and underpinnings of the approach, it becomes apparent that Sustainable Development simply embodies a new form of the old discourse; it fails to emerge from its ethnocentric vices.

2. Secondly, the approach neglects to reconcile development’s inherent contradictions and downfalls. The policy therefore fails to take into account the ways that the Western world contributes to the inferiority and subordination of poorer parts of the world. Also, the concept is much too broad and all-encompassing, creating ambiguity in terms of its definition and causing a gap to occur between its rhetoric and policy initiatives. This lack of clarity also results in a varied range of policy choices, often contradictory and incoherent.

3. Yet another way that the Sustainable Development approach perpetuates and reaffirms past discarded policies is in its ethnocentric, technocentric and anthropocentric qualities, exposing its inherently Western biases (Adams 1995; Watts 1995). While past approaches have failed to meaningfully address the needs, values and cultural differences of “developing” nations, Sustainable Development repeats these mistakes.

4. Another criticism of Sustainable Development is the way that it unsuccessfully attempts to mesh two contradictory endeavours: environmental protection and economic expansion. “By adopting the concept of Sustainable Development, two old enemies, Growth and the Environment, are reconciled. It is Growth (read: Capitalist market expansion), and not the Environment, that has to be sustained” (Escobar 1995). This approach thus purports that “only minor adjustments to the market system are needed to launch an era of environmentally sound development, hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate environmental considerations.

5. Perhaps, one of the greatest failures of Sustainable Development is its lack of attention to excessive consumption in the West. Our current understanding of the relationship between over-consumption, under-consumption and Sustainable Development remain narrow and misleading. Maximization of Capitalist profit and environmentally sustainable and equitable consumption cannot be achieved simultaneously (Fernando 2003).

Yet another critique of Sustainable Development brings into focus a set of additional limitations from a Gandhian perspective (Kothari, et. al. 2014):

1. **Absence of an analysis of the historical and structural roots of poverty, hunger, unsustainability, and inequities, which include centralization of state power, capitalist monopolies, colonialism, racism and patriarchy.** Without this diagnosis, it is inevitable that the prescriptions will not be transformative enough.

2. **Inadequate focus on direct democratic governance:** There is welcome stress on accountability and transparency, but not on direct democracy (decision making by citizens and communities in face-to-face settings). Power in such a polity would flow upwards from the ground, enabling greater accountability and transparency than possible in only representative democracy. There is no mention of indigenous peoples’ rights to self-determination (now recognized under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), or of free, prior and informed consent powers to communities relating to lands and resources (ILO, Convention 169).
3. **Inability to recognize the biophysical limits to economic growth:** While recognizing ecological limits, these approaches do not see the inherent contradiction between these same limits and unending economic growth (which necessarily entails increasing material and energy flows, as ecological economists have shown). Instead, there is repeated talk of 'accelerated growth', albeit 'green' and 'inclusive'. Given that human activity has already crossed several planetary boundaries, we may need global degrowth, along with radical redistribution so that countries/regions thus far deprived can gain without further threatening the Earth.

4. **Continued subservience to private capital:** The approaches remain excessively soft towards big private business and finance capital, and dependent on their goodwill (i.e., voluntary measures) to not only make their operations sustainable but to provide financial support for the transition to sustainability. There is hardly any talk of the need to reign-in irresponsible corporate behaviour towards the Earth and people, through legal and other regulatory mechanisms; and no talk whatsoever of the need to transfer control over the means of production to collectives of producers. There is also continued faith in market mechanisms (e.g. the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) mechanism), despite the evidence that these not only hardly work, but are inimical to the goals of equity and justice as they foster commodification.

5. **Modern science and technology held as panacea:** There is some grudging concession to indigenous and traditional knowledge, practices, and technologies, but in general, the Sustainable Development approaches focus predominantly on modern science and technology. Largely ignored is the need to promote democratic, community-based research and development (R&D), and the importance of keeping knowledge in the commons or public domain.

6. **Culture, ethics and spirituality nowhere in the picture:** The importance of cultural diversity, and of ethical and spiritual values (especially towards fellow humans and the rest of nature) is greatly underplayed. The crucial links between culture, sustainability and equity are neither worked out nor recognized.

7. **Unbridled consumerism not tackled head-on:** While there is a welcome focus on sustainable production and consumption, there is no explicit focus on the need to curb and drastically cut down the present consumption levels of the rich in the global North (the so-called 1 percent, including the dominant elites of the South). Without this, the majority of humankind will never have the space needed to become more secure and genuinely prosperous.

8. **Global relations built on localization and self-reliance missing:** There is little acknowledgement of the need for relatively self-reliant (not to be confused with 'gated'!) communities, at least for basic material/physical, learning, and health needs, with governments and civil society facilitation. Examples across the world testify to the possibilities of such a transformation, which dramatically cuts unsustainable transportation, empowers people to be in control of their own lives, democratizes production and markets, and provides a stable basis for wider socio-economic and political relations across communities.

9. **No new architecture of global governance:** Missing is the need to change the current system of global governance to be far more responsive and accountable to the peoples of the world; whether it is a reformed UN, or a new global assembly of peoples that brings out
board all relevant partners, indigenous peoples and local communities. Such global governance would have to prioritize human rights and environmental agreements over economic, finance, trade, and commerce agreements.

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A range of different and complementary notions or worldviews have emerged in various regions of the world that seek to envision and achieve more fundamental transformation than that proposed by Sustainable Development approaches (Kothari et al. 2014). Some of these are a revival of ancient worldviews of indigenous peoples; some have emerged from recent social and environmental movements in relation to old traditions and philosophies. Arising from different cultural and social contexts, they sometime differ upon the prognosis (what and how shall it be done), but they share the main characteristics of the diagnosis (what is the problem and who is responsible for it), as well as similar or equivalent Weltanschauungen (worldviews).

The Western development model is a mental construct adopted by (read, imposed upon) the rest of the world that need to be deconstructed (Latouche, 2009). Development might thus be seen as a toxic term to be rejected (Dearden, 2014), and thus, ‘Sustainable Development’ an oxymoron. Deconstructing development opens up the door for a multiplicity of new and old notions and worldviews. This includes Buen Vivir, a culture of life with different names and varieties in various regions of South America (Gudynas, 2011; Moniri and Pallottino, Development, forthcoming); ‘Ubuntu’ with its emphasis on human mutuality in South Africa and several equivalents in other parts of Africa (Metz, 2011); Swaraj with a focus on self-reliance and self-governance, in India (Kothari, 2014); ‘degrowth’ as the hypothesis that we can live well with less, and in common (D’Alisa et al., 2014); and many others.

What is remarkable about these alternative proposals, however, is that they often arise from traditionally marginalized groups. These worldviews are different from dominant Western ones as they emerge from non-capitalist communities, and therefore break with the anthropocentric and androcentric logic of Capitalism, the dominant civilization, as well as with the various State Socialism (effectively State Capitalism) models existing until now. However, some approaches emerging from within the ‘belly of the beast’ (Capitalist or industrialized countries) can also break from dominant logic, such as is the case with ‘degrowth’. These worldviews differ sharply from today’s notion of development. It is not about applying a set of policies, instruments and indicators to exit ‘underdevelopment’ and reach that desired condition of ‘development’. In any case, how many countries have achieved development? Decades after the notion of ‘development’ was spread around the world, only a handful of countries can be called ‘developed’, others are struggling to emulate them, and all are doing this at enormous ecological and social cost. The problem is not in the lack of implementation, but rather in the concept of development as linear, unidirectional material and financial growth (Kothari, et al. 2014)

**Ecological Swaraj or Radical Ecological Democracy (RED) from India** (Kothari, et al. 2014)

Emerging from the grass-roots experience of communities and civil society practicing or conceiving alternatives across the range of human endeavour in India, Ecological Swaraj (loosely, self-rule including self-reliance), or RED (Radical Ecological Democracy) is a framework that respects the limits of the Earth and the rights of other species, while pursuing the core values of social justice and equity. With its strong democratic and egalitarian impulse, it seeks to empower every person to be a part of decision making, and its holistic vision of human well-being encompasses physical, material, socio-cultural, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions (Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012; Kothari, 2014). Rather than the state and the corporation, it puts collectives and communities at the centre of governance and the economy, an approach that is grounded in real-life initiatives across the Indian subcontinent (see www. alternativesindia.org).

This approach rests on the following main (intersecting) elements:
Ecological sustainability, including the conservation of Nature (ecosystems, species, functions, and cycles) and its resilience, building on the belief that humanity is part of Nature, and that the rest of Nature has the intrinsic right to thrive.

Social well-being and justice, including lives that are fulfilling and satisfactory physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually; where there is equity in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities across gender, class, caste, age, ethnicities, and other current divisions; where there is a balance between collective interests and individual freedoms; and, where peace and harmony are ensured.

Direct political democracy, where decision-making power starts at the smallest unit of human settlement (rural or urban), in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this unit to larger levels of governance that are downwardly accountable; and, where political decision making takes place respecting ecological and cultural boundaries.

Economic democracy, in which local communities (including producers and consumers, often combined in one) have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets; where localization is a key principle providing for all basic needs through the local regional economy, and larger trade and exchange, as necessary, is built on and safeguards this local self-reliance; and, where non-monetized relations of caring and sharing regain their central importance.

Cultural and knowledge plurality, in which diversity is a key principle; knowledge (its generation, use and transmission) is in the public domain; innovation is democratically generated and there are no ivory towers of ‘expertise’; learning takes place as part of life and living, rather than only in specialized institutions; and, individual or collective pathways of ethical and spiritual well-being and of happiness are available to all.

Ecological Swaraj is an evolving worldview, not a blueprint set in stone. In its very process of democratic grassroots evolution, it forms an alternative to top-down ideologies and formulations, even as it takes on board the relevant elements of such ideologies. This is the basis of its transformative potential (Kothari, et. al. 2014).

Concluding Observations

The proponents of Sustainable Development are faced with a dilemma that affects any programme of political action and social change: the dilemma between the urge to take strong stands on fundamental concerns and the need to gain wide political acceptance and support. Sharachchandra Lele believes that, in the long run, there is no contradiction between better articulation of the terms, concepts, analytical methods and policy-making principles, and gaining political strength and broad social acceptance – especially at the grassroots (Lele 1991). If Sustainable Development is to be really sustained as a development paradigm, two apparently divergent efforts are called for: Making Sustainable Development more precise in its conceptual underpinnings, while allowing more flexibility and diversity of approaches in developing strategies that might lead to a society living in harmony with the environment and with itself.

Hon. Professor, Karnataka State Rural Development and Panchayat Raj University, Gadag, Karnataka, India. E-mail: jeeves0607@yahoo.com