

Environment and Sustainable Development: Issues and Concepts

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I. Introduction:

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the key legal principles of environment and sustainable development. The outline how these principles have been incorporated into environmental laws at the international and national level. This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive review of every law that addresses sustainable development, rather it highlights that there is a growing recognition, at all levels be they national or international. In recent years, a number of international agreements have been tasked with interpreting legislative provisions that require the principles of sustainable development to be taken into account. These decisions, which will be touched upon below, are providing some guidance for decision makers. It is important to identify how environmental law frameworks can give effect to development. The first part of this paper introduces the concept of sustainable development and its key principles. The second part of the paper identifies the expression of some of the key principles at an international and national level. The third part of this paper is devoted to challenges, ethical principles and some truths of environment and sustainable development.

II. What is Sustainable Development?

For Sustainable Development to happen, the world of nations agreed to focus all development initiatives towards sustainability of resources. “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”². It is the harmonious integration of a sound and viable economy; responsible governance; social cohesion; and ecological integrity to ensure that development is a life-sustaining process. Sustainable Development = Economic Development + Environment Protection + Social Reform + People’s Empowerment. Sustainable Development is a much broader concept than environmental protection – it implies a concern for future generations, for equity between people and for the social, health and ethical dimensions of human welfare³. Putting sustainable development into practice

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2 Our Common Future, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987. Published as Annex to General Assembly document A/42/427, Development and International Co-operation: Environment August 2, 1987. Retrieved, 2007.11.14

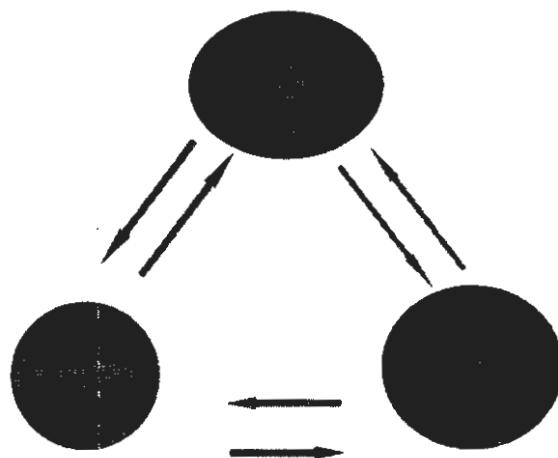
3 EU Communication on Sustainable Urban Development – 1998, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/urban/policy_initiatives.htm

demands debate, experimentation and continuous learning and therefore requires a thriving democracy to allow it to evolve and flourish. Sustainable development should be the organising principle of all democratic societies, underpinning all other goals, policies and processes⁴. The EU strategy for sustainable development offers a positive and ambitious vision of society in which economic growth goes hand in hand with environmental protection and social well being - win-win solutions are possible - we can achieve prosperity without jeopardizing either society or the environment⁵.

Sustainable Development is the only intellectually coherent, sufficiently inclusive, potentially mind-changing concept that gets even half-way close to capturing the true nature and urgency of the challenge that now confronts the world⁶. It is about getting a balance between development, government, society and environment by trying to equitably share development benefits. It is also about doing more with less, developing in a less consumer-intensive manner and reducing waste streams.

III. Areas of Sustainable Development:

Sustainable development related with three components — Economic development, social development and environmental protection as interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars – poverty, governance, health, education, demographics, natural, hazards, atmosphere, land, oceans, seas & coasts, freshwater, biodiversity, national economy, national development, global economy, are overarching objectives of, and essential requirements for, sustainable development.



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- 4 Sustainable Development Commission UK, available at: <http://www.sustainabledevelopmentcommission.org.uk/>
 - 5 The Lisbon Declaration, available - http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Lisbon_Convention/Lisbon_Declaration.pdf
 - 6 Jonathon Porritt GMI, 2002, available - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2011/mar/04/sustainable-development-rip>

Sustainable development - Our way of life is placing an increasing burden on the planet - this cannot be sustained. Current developments which meet the needs of the present must do so without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development policies encompass three general policy areas: economic, environmental and social. Within this topic we will examine in greater detail sustainable development and the appropriate technologies which tackle these areas. First the Economic area Generation of wealth through economic activity is necessary to attain a high standard of living. Sustainable economies also need to be competitive and there must be fair distribution of wealth. Products that are too expensive to purchase cannot be sustainable, even if they are environment friendly. Second. the environmental area sustainable human activities must strive to protect the earth's environment to make sure it is not damaged for future generations. Current issues include global warming & climate change, over-fishing, pollution, deforestation, land use policies. Third, the social area to have a sustainable future, the people must have equal and equitable access to their basic needs to access to high quality medical care and social services, decent housing, food, sanitation. People's desire for as high a standard of living as possible must be achieved in a way that does not harm or exploit others.

IV. Key Milestones of Environment and Development:

International summits or laws on sustainable development that proposed, argued, agreed upon and ultimately adopted existing international agreements vary in content. Certain conferences – including African Convention 1968, Stockholm Conference 1972, Our Common Future 1987, Earth Summit 1992, Millennium Summit 2000 and WSSD Johannesburg 2002 are condoned as milestones.

V. Stockholm Conference on Environment (1972):

The whole world agreed on the urgent need to respond to the problem of environmental deterioration. Following are some sustainable development principle:

1. The fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations.
2. The fundamental right to all peoples the benefits of development and the opportunity to enhance the quality of life. Wrongly or heedlessly applied, the same power can do incalculable harm to human beings and the human environment.
3. Man has a special responsibility to safeguard and wisely manage the heritage of wildlife and nature conservation, must therefore receive importance in planning for economic development.
4. Development is essential for ensuring a favourable living and working

environment for man and for creating conditions on earth that are necessary for the improvement of the quality of life.

India was willing to attain social and economic development upon attaining independence. Indira Gandhi, at Stockholm Conference, 1972 said- "...the environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty, unless we are in a position to provide employment and purchasing power for the daily necessities of the tribal people and those who live in around our jungles, we cannot prevent them from combing the forests for food and livelihood; from poaching and from despoiling the vegetation. How can we speak to those who live in villages and slums about keeping the oceans, the rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the source?"

VI. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED): "Our Common Future" (Brundtland 1987)

The Brundtland Commission, formally the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was created to address growing concern "about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development" ⁷. Our Common Future set up the concept of sustainable development, arguing that because environment and development are inseparably related and development is worked out on the basis of the environment and resources, environmental conservation is essential in order to achieve sustainable development. In this report, sustainable development is defined as follows: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Sustainable development is generally though to have three components: environment, society, and economy. Sustainable development aims to establish a balance among these three. The balance among these three pillars is dependent upon each individual's local circumstances.

Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Commission Report, targets multilateralism and interdependence of nations in the search for a sustainable development path. The report sought to recapture the spirit of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment - the Stockholm Conference - which had introduced environmental concerns to the formal political development sphere. Our Common Future placed environmental issues firmly on the political agenda; it aimed to discuss the environment and development as one single issue.

The publication of Our Common Future and the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development laid the groundwork for the convening of the 1992 Earth Summit and the adoption of Agenda 21, the Rio

7 Brundtland Commission was established in 1983 in response to United Nations General Assembly (UN/GA) Resolution 38/161.

Declaration and to the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

VII. Rio Earth Summit (1992):

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was an international conference held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from June 2-14, 1992. It was an outcome of the Earth Summit convention on biodiversity, framework convention on climate change, principles of forest management; agenda 21 and the environment and development. It was agreed that the protection of the environment and social and economic development are fundamental to sustainable development. The Rio Declaration contains 27 principles for environment and development and among these are Precautionary Principle and Polluter Pays Principle (PPP). If there is reason to believe that something is harmful to the environment there is no need to wait for overwhelming evidence to stop using it. And the PPP says basically that if you pollute you should pay for it. The Summit adopted three key agreements to achieve sustainable development:

1. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) – a series of principles defining the rights and responsibilities of States for achieving sustainable development;
2. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Agenda 21 – a comprehensive plan of action to achieve sustainable development;
3. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) – a set of principles that underlie the sustainable management of forests in the world.

VIII. 1992 Agenda 21:

To achieve such development, the global program agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration to reaffirm global commitment were adopted. This contain following principle:

1. Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.
2. The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.
3. In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it.

To ensure effective follow-up of UNCED, and to monitor and report on implementation of the agreements at the local, national, regional and international levels, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was created in December 1992.

IX. The UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) 2002: World Summit on Sustainable Development was held at Johannesburg, South Africa from 2-4 September 2002. (2002 WSSD Plan of Implementation, Chapter XI, 148 e), some sustainable development principle of the summit are:

1. The basic requirements of sustainable development are clean water, sanitation, adequate shelter, energy, health care, food security and the protection of biodiversity.
2. The sustainable development include: chronic hunger; malnutrition; foreign occupation; armed conflict; illicit drug problems; organized crime; corruption; natural disasters; illicit arms trafficking; trafficking in persons; terrorism; intolerance and incitement to racial, ethnic, religious and other hatreds; xenophobia; and endemic, communicable and chronic diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

The Brundtland Commission calls a new charter or universal declaration on environment and development to “guide state and inter-state behavior”. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in 1980 provided the basic object to sustainable development and environment, maintaining essential ecological processes and life support systems, preserving genetic diversity, and ensuring the sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems. It also appreciated that sustainable development in the global context and the underlying problems that must be overcome are identical. It thus recommended a holistic approach to conservation and highlighted the importance of using natural resources in sustainable manner.

X. Environment and Development in India:

The environment has assumed important place in recent years. Some of the general or basic principles of environment have been incorporated into national constitutions of developing countries like the right to access justice and the individual's right to a clean and healthy environment and his/her duty to protect and defend environment legally. Constitution of India in part iv have two express provision regarding the protection of environment namely article 48 – A and 51 – A(g). Environmental protection and development in the estimation of Indian Supreme Court and the High Courts cover a wide range of areas including air, water, solid waste, hazardous wastes, forests, mining activities, and architectural treasures. In many cases Supreme Court said, right to pollution free environment as a right emanating from the right to life, right to live with human dignity, the right to sweet water, and the right to free air are attributes of the right to life, for these are the basic elements which sustain life itself. The Courts appear to be ready to deliver judgments that should result in greater environmental protection or reduced environmental depletion. Judiciary analyses the system of assignments, problems arising from the overlapping assignments, bargaining, dispute resolution mechanisms in regard to the environment and development. Some principles laid down by Supreme Court for protecting environment and development is as under:

A. Public Trust Doctrine:

- In *M.C.Mehta v. Kamal Nath*⁸, the Supreme Court held that where an attempt was made to divert flow of a river for augmenting facilities at a motel, it was held that State and its instrumentalities as trustees have a duty to protect and preserve natural resources. The state, as a trustee of all natural resources, was under a legal duty to protect them, and that the resources were meant for public use and could not be transferred to private ownership.
- In *MI Builders Pvt. Ltd. v. Radhey Shyam Sahu*⁹, the Supreme Court held that a city development authority was asked to dismantle an underground market built beneath a garden of historical importance.

B. Precautionary Principle:

- In *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India*¹⁰, the Supreme Court observed that the principle was adopted to check pollution of underground water caused by tanneries in Tamil Nadu.
- In *Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India*¹¹, the Supreme Court held that the precautionary principle could not be applied to the decision for building a dam whose gains and losses were predictable and certain.

C. Polluter Pays Principle:

- The object of this principle is to make the polluter liable for the compensation to the victims as also for the cost of restoring of environmental degradation.
- In *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India*¹², the Supreme Court held that the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle are part of environmental law of the country.
- In *M.C. Mehta Vs. Kamal Nath*¹³, the Supreme Court observed that the “polluter pays” rule has been recognized as a fundamental objective of government policy in India, to prevent and control pollution. However, the court recently held that the power to award damages under Article 32 of the constitution, or even exemplary damages to compensate environmental harm, would not extend to the levy of a pollution fine. A principle impact of the public trust doctrine is said to be the necessitating of a balancing of private and public property rights.

8 (1996) 1 SCC 38.

9 AIR 1996 SC 2468.

10 AIR 1996 SC 2718.

11 AIR 2000 SC 375.

12 AIR,1996 SC 2718.

13 (1997)1 SCC 388.

D. Absolute Liability Principle:

- In M. C. Mehta v. Union of India¹⁴, (Oleum Gas Leak Case) the Supreme Court was adopted to compensate victims of pollution caused by inherently dangerous industries.
- In Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India¹⁵, the Supreme Court held that the precautionary principle could not be applied to the decision for building a dam whose gains and losses were predictable and certain.

E. Sustainable Development Principle:

- In M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Taj Trapezium Case)¹⁶, the disastrous effects that the emissions from the Mathura Oil Refinery had on the Taj Mahal, the Supreme Court applied the principle of sustainable development to the case, and apart from passing various directions, stepped in to execute and supervise the resultant actions.
- In State of Himachal Pradesh v. Ganesh Wood Products¹⁷, the Supreme Court invalidated forest based industry, recognizing the principle of inter-generational equity and sustainable development.

XI. Environment Courts (Green Courts):

Environment Courts are seen as a crucial tool in environmental management, acting as a key mechanism for ensuring legal effectiveness of environmental law. The court tends to bring about a judicious balance between environmental, social and development considerations, thereby promoting sustainable development. The members of Environment Courts are typically chosen, at least in part, due to a certain level of expertise and understanding of environmental issues, which is significant, in the light of frequently large amount of complex scientific/technical or other data that can be involved in environmental disputes.

- India National Environment Tribunal : constituted by the National Environment Tribunal Act, 1995
- India National Environment Appellate Authority : constituted by the National Environment Appellate Authority, 1997

XII. National Environment Policy 2006: Following measures have been adopted in this policy –

- (i) **Livelihood Security for the Poor:** To ensure equitable access to environmental resources and quality for all sections of society, and in

14 AIR 1987 SC 1086.

15 AIR 2000 SC 375.

16 AIR 1997 SC 734.

17 AIR 1996 SC 149

particular, to ensure that poor communities, which are most dependent on environmental resources for their livelihoods, are assured secure access to these resources.

- (ii) **Integration of Environmental Concerns in Economic and Social Development:** To integrate environmental concerns into policies, plans, programmes, and projects for economic and social development.
- (iii) Enhancement of resources for environmental conservation through mutually beneficial multistakeholder partnerships among local communities, public agencies, academic and research community, investors and multilateral/bilateral development partners.

XIII. Environment and Sustainability can be Summarized in Some Key Issues:

- Benefits of economic activity must be considered in relation to their respective social and environmental consequences;
- In using resources, we must consider the needs and expectations of future generations;
- Government, business and other segments of civil society must act together to balance these needs;
- The corporate governance contributes to sustainable economic development by enhancing the performance of the company and increasing its access to land and capital.
- To protect and respect communities development aspirations, and mitigate the impacts of our mining activities. Our ability to engage, understand and manage the needs and interests of communities during the development and operating stages is the key challenge around communities.
- Protect human health and the environment, and work in cooperation with host communities and governments to create sustainable, long-term economic and social opportunities.
- Eliminate or reduce to a level as low as reasonably possible any risk that could result in personal injury, illness, property damage, process or loss to the environment by developing and implementing the most effective health, safety and loss prevention management system possible.
- Attract, develop and retain the company's most valuable asset, our employees.

XIV. Environment and Sustainable Development Challenge:

- National authorities are enabled to place equitable development at the core of their public policy;

- Pectoral policies are complementary and contribute to the overarching purpose of sustainable development,
- Sector programmes and initiatives are synergized;
- Ways are found to involve a widening circle of interested parties and institutions,
- Addressing the linkages among economic, social and environmental sustainability,
- Planning legal, institutional basis and policy assessment,
- Choosing approaches for the strategy process,
- Inter-generational principle of sustainable development,
- Addressing the linkages between economic, social and environmental sustainability.

XV. Environment and Sustainable Development and Ethical Principles:

- Respect Earth and life in all its diversity,
- Care for the community of life,
- Build democratic societies,
- Secure Earth's bounty and beauty,
- Protect and restore ... Earth's ecological systems,
- Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction,
- Advance the study of ecological sustainability,
- Eradicate poverty,
- Ensure that economic activities ... promote human development,
- Affirm gender equality,
- Uphold the right of all ... to a natural and social environment,
- Strengthen democratic institutions,
- Integrate environmental sustainability into formal education and life-long learning,
- Treat all living beings with respect and consideration,
- Promote a culture and peace

XVI. Development Some Truths:

Evolution is development; all species are designed to develop and flourish, usually at the expense of other species. But growth is normally self-limiting – unsustainable populations will die back or become extinct. No development and no life-form has zero impact on the environment, but the environment on this planet has an extensive ability to absorb change. The human population is projected to double by 2050. Is this sustainable? Why is no-one seriously addressing this question? Newly mined materials will be essential to support this growing

population more resources as more food to eat, more water to drink and more space to live is also necessary. Laudable objectives of reducing poverty imply significant increases in raw materials usage to build infrastructure and meet new consumer demand in developing countries. Per capita consumption rates in the developing world are growing fast, and would be huge if they matched US rates. Recycling cannot satisfy this demand when population and per capita consumption are growing. New attracts are to be looked for.

XVII. Environmental Sustainability:

Development is the basic philosophy based on the idea that “environment” and “development” can be coexistent and development that incorporates environmental conservation is important. Environmental sustainability is the process of making sure that current processes of interaction with the environment are pursued with the idea of keeping the environment as pristine as naturally possible based on ideal-seeking behavior. An “unsustainable situation” occurs when natural capital (the sum total of nature’s resources) is used up faster than it can be replenished. Sustainability requires that human activity only uses nature’s resources at a rate at which they can be replenished naturally. Inherently the concept of sustainable development is intertwined with the concept of carrying capacity. Theoretically, the long-term result of environmental degradation is the inability to sustain human life. Such degradation on a global scale could imply extinction for humanity. Pollution does not respect political boundaries, making international law an important aspect of environmental law. A plethora of legally binding international agreements now encompass a wide variety of issue-areas, from terrestrial, marine and atmospheric pollution through to wildlife and biodiversity protection.

XVIII. Durban Debate and Development:

In Indian context much has been done by the Indian Judiciary to stick to the letter and spirit of the concept of sustainable development but in the light of Durban Debate. India and other emerging economies kick start discussions for a new single legal binding treaty before the even politically pledge to the Kyoto Protocol beyond 2012. Since Cancun, India had decided that the country would not undertake any legally binding targets at this stage of its development. Even under the review stated for 2015, India will not accept the proposal of some countries to rework the existing UN compact. It will insist that a fair burden-sharing formula among countries be built into any decision on capping global emissions. It seeks to incorporate past emissions, which are higher for rich nations, to become the yardstick for such a formula¹⁸.

In Durban the choice for the developing world is two-fold: join the US and its coalition which wants to do as little as possible to cut emissions and to rid

18 The Times of India (Allahabad), Dec. 2, 2011.

the concept of equity in negotiations. Or, to go with the EU and its gang, which wants the world to junk the Kyoto Protocol – the legal instrument for emission reductions based on the concept of differentiation between the past and future pollutions, and to replace it with a single legal instrument, which will then end the differentiation once for all. The agreement in Durban must be based on past and future contributions of all countries so that every country has limits to growth. It would put controls on China and India, but based on our rightful share to the global atmospheric space. That will be fair. It will be effective. The developing world must say that the right to development is not negotiable¹⁹. The basic issues of development are legally binding international norms or not. However, the process to draft out applicable international laws and agreements is a long and torturous one, not to mention efforts to enforce it in international situations.

XIX. Conclusion:

International law on sustainable development, give special attention to the delicate balance between environmental and developmental concerns and strengthen the relationship between existing international instruments or agreements in the field of environment and relevant social, environment and economic agreements or instruments, taking into account the special needs of developing countries. Developed countries are enquired to provide developing countries with technical assistance in their attempts to enhance their national legislative capabilities in the field of environmental law. Environment and sustainable development issues are related to national, sub-regional, regional and international levels, including in the United Nations system institutional arrangements.

The Sustainable Development initiative goal is to raise awareness worldwide and to promote understanding of its inclusive ethical vision and to seek recognition. To promote environmental sustainability development is ethical guide and the implementation of its principles by civil society, business houses and government. Environmentally sustainable use of biodiversity into strategies relating to production sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, tourism and mining, considerations in poverty reduction plans and national sustainable development plans is also required. Sustainable development requires an understanding and acceptance of the importance of a healthy environment to proper functioning of production sectors, requires mechanisms (e.g. inter-agency taskforces; coordinating committees etc;), the will and ability to identify win-win situations, requires an extensive strategy of communication, education and public awareness. Similar approach is also to be used in infrastructure development areas.

Indian judiciary is a key mechanism for ensuring legal effectiveness of environmental protection and sustainable development. A judiciary well informed

¹⁹ Ibid.

of the rapidly expanding environmental laws, can play a critical role in interpretation, development and enforcement of environmental laws enforcing environmental rights, public access to judicial procedures and exchange of judgments, sharing information on environmental law, policy and environmental jurisprudence.

Sustainable development to promote the transition to sustainable ways of living and a global society founded on a shared ethical framework that includes respect and care for the life of community ecological integrity, universal human rights, respect for diversity, economic justice, democracy, and a culture of peace is the need of the hour which will ultimately pave the way for a protected environment for coming generations and in turn they will take care of the same as public trustee for future generations.

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