

Lecture 3

Sustainable Development (III): Our Common Future?



KEY QUESTION:

What are the challenges that might limit the progress towards sustainable development?

With the completion of this lecture, attached readings and tutorial, you should be able to understand:

- the economic and political challenges limiting the progress towards sustainable development

Lecture Outline

- 3.1 Introduction: What's "wrong" with the concept of sustainable development?
- 3.2 Political Challenges
 - 3.2.1 The Differing Perspectives of Developed and Developing Countries
 - 3.2.2 Local Political Context
- 3.3 Economic Challenges
 - 3.3.1 Who pays? Developed or Developing Countries
 - 3.3.2 Energy Transition

Box 1: The varied 'ways' to sustainable development

1972	1992	2012	2015	2016	A timeline of international conferences on sustainable development & climate change
Stockholm Conference	Earth Summit, Rio	Rio+20	Paris Conference		
Participants	Participants	Participants	Participants		
114 nations (excluding Soviet Union and its allies) 10,000 campaigners	172 nations, with 108 sending their Heads of State 2,400 NGOs 17,000 attended parallel NGO Forum	192 nations, with 130 Heads of State (excluding USA, Germany, UK) NGOs, diplomats, business leaders, 70,000 activists 10,000 journalists	196 countries		
Outcomes	Outcomes	Outcomes	Outcomes	Outcomes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Framework for Environmental Action" with 26 principles concerning the environment and development. • United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development • Agenda 21 • The Statement of Forest Principles • Established Commission on Sustainable Development • Reform of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) <p>3 conventions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 2. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) 3. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renewed commitment to sustainable development and poverty eradication. • 17 Sustainable Development Goals (adopted in 2016). <p>(See text for more details)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paris Agreement: to limit the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. • Countries will aim to reach "global peaking" of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible. • Paris Agreement has a 'bottom up' structure in contrast to most international environmental law treaties, which are 'top down'. Nations will set own targets and means to meet them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paris Agreement came into effect 4th November 2016. 	
Impact	Impact	Impact	Impact	Impact	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation of modern environmentalism. • EU developed its first Environmental Action Programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Earth Summit influenced all subsequent UN conferences on relationships between human rights, population, social development, women, and human settlements. • UNFCCC led to Kyoto 1997 and the Paris Agreement 2015. • Agenda 21 has been accepted worldwide, although progress is difficult to measure – see main text. • Eco-efficiency is now a guiding principle for business and governments. • Uneven progress in sustainable development and poverty eradication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generated new momentum for achieving sustainable development. • The UN wanted a UN "green economy roadmap", with environmental goals, targets, and deadlines, whereas developing countries preferred establishing new "sustainable development goals" to better protect the environment, guarantee food and power to the poorest, and alleviate poverty. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measurement of NDCs (Nationally Determined Contributions) to start in 2020. It is not binding, there is no enforcement, name and shame only. • Negotiators and scientists believe the lower figure of 1.5°C is necessary. In the first half of 2016, average temperatures were about 1.3°C above the average in 1880, when global record-keeping began. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marked a new course in the global climate effort (the agreement starts in 2020). 	

Following the Brundtland Report in 1987, the Rio conference in '92 promised to chart a path for the world to attain sustainable development. More than 30 years have since passed, yet we remain concerned, and indeed more than ever before. This is despite the multiple conferences meant to discuss strategies and nudge actions. What is stopping us from moving forward and faster?

3.1 Introduction: What's "wrong" with the concept of sustainable development?

- The idea of sustainable development is an attempt to overcome two fundamental conflicts that became increasingly apparent.
 - The first of these is the seeming **incompatibility** between maintaining a healthy environment and the economic growth needed for development;
 - The second is the **continuing gap** between the quality of life in developed countries and the developing countries.
- These conflicts play out clearly especially when we take the positions of developed countries and developing countries respectively. As **Section 3.3** shows, developing countries want better **development**, while developed countries want a better **environment**, preferably without harming their own development prospects too much (see **Section 3.2**).
- The Brundtland Report, **Our Common Future** (WCED, 1987), was important for securing wide public exposure for sustainable development and establishing it on the international political agenda. Both developing countries and developed countries could agree with what it said. But, it had two basic flaws.
 - First, **it did not say how continued economic growth could in practice be balanced against the need to conserve resources and natural environments**. This effectively put human needs before those of the environment.
 - Second, **it was sufficiently ambiguous** to enable each of the two main interest groups to interpret the meaning of sustainable development in a way that reflected their own agenda. So governments and campaigners in **developed countries** believed that sustainable development would mean **better environmental protection**. Their counterparts in **developing countries**, on the other hand, believed that it would bring them **more development** (that is, reducing poverty and attaining the status of modern societies)
- The disagreements and contradictions between developed and developing countries on what constitutes sustainable development, and the roles each should play, are perhaps best exemplified by considering their perspectives separately.

3.2 Political Challenges

3.2.1 The Conflicting Perspectives of Developed and Developing Countries

(a) Developed Countries

- More of leading developed countries have realised that after decades of economic activity that had driven their growth, **environmental impacts could rebound on the whole of humanity**, thus began to lead the drive for greater environmental protection.
- But it was the developing countries collectively have more control over much biodiversity and forested areas.
- In the attempts of developed countries to achieve their pursuit for continued economic growth and yet balanced with the need for environmental conservation, **sustainable development** was recommended to developing countries as a developmental path that would not replicate the environmental degradation that had been incurred in the developed countries.

- However, developed countries themselves did not demonstrate the willingness to rethink their existing consumption and production patterns, and the responsibility to reduce resource use and pollution that should be assigned to them.
- For example, in 1992, the U.S. president George Bush senior famously proclaimed that “the American way of life is non-negotiable.” The United States in particular remained opposed to singling out rich countries' consumption and production patterns for criticism. On the other hand, developing countries such as India has long demanded a distinction between luxury and subsistence consumption.

(b) Developing Countries

- Developing countries on the other hand are faced with their challenges of **rising populations and the need for rapid economic development**, hence are looking towards the exploitation of their natural resources to arrive at their developmental goals. Political leaders in developing countries therefore had **a different agenda** from those of developed countries.
- Developed countries had become wealthy by despoiling their environments and those of developing countries too. **So it was seen as hypocritical of the developed countries now to ask developing countries to protect their environments and control population growth at the expense of the chance of economic development.**
- Despite attempting to replicate the success of developed countries, with a few notable exceptions such as South Korea and Taiwan, most developing countries failed to realise the development idea.
- They still suffered from poverty, famine and ill health and so were not interested to adopt the new environmental goal that had become popular in developed countries or the supposedly more realistic ideal of sustainable development.
- Sustainable development to some extent can be viewed by the developing countries as a strategy of the developed countries to curb their economic growths. Developing countries were unwilling to commit on actions which slowed down their economic progress or reduced their access to their own natural resources.

3.2.2 Local Political Context

- While **Section 3.2.1** presents the political tensions between developed and developing countries, political challenges exist too at the more localised level as countries continue to progress towards sustainable development. Though not exclusively so, political challenges are more apparent in developing countries.

(a) Weak political commitment

- As **Lect 2 Section 2.5** outlines, the collection of regular and good quality data is necessary. There is a relationship between high-quality data and good governance. The availability of funds to statistical institutions reflects what governments choose to invest in. The data gap undermines

capacity to establish baselines, track performance and make evidence-based decisions at national and sub-national levels. Poor-quality data also reduces accountability as it masks inequalities within countries.

(b) Insufficient decentralisation of decision-making power

- In some African countries, local governments are assigned only with low levels of power to develop contextualised SDG monitoring systems.
 - When central government institutions do not grant sufficient autonomy to local government institutions, it makes it difficult for local governments to take independent decisions that respond to the needs of citizens, as they are controlled by central agencies.
 - For instance, in Angola, provincial governors are appointed by national government, and municipal administrators are appointed by provincial governors, subject to confirmation by the national government. This situation creates local government institutions closely aligned and reporting to central governments. Hence conflicts arise when central government demands are not aligned with the requests of local citizens.
 - Structures like this typically lead to a situation where SDG implementation may be localised, but implementation efforts may not respond appropriately to the needs of citizens in their locality, particularly vulnerable groups.

(c) Low quality of governance

- **Corruption** is not an unusual practice in developing countries, such as Congo, Niger, Nigeria and Angola in Africa. Once in the hands of government officials, *how public revenues are deployed* depends on the **priorities** and **integrity** of state power-holders.
 - In a 2011 study, the authors examined the effect of oil revenues on corruption and state stability for a panel of 31 oil-exporting countries between 1992 and 2005. They found that an increase in oil revenues significantly **increases corruption**, especially in countries with a high share of state participation in oil production.
- **Political instability** can prevent, and even roll back, progress made in sustainable development. Civil wars and military coups in recent history has proven so. **Fig. 1** lists some news headlines reported on the 2nd anniversary of the military takeover in Myanmar.

Fig. 1

Myanmar Coup: Two Years On

Social

- More than 2,500 killed, thousands detained in crackdown by military
- Political, economic instability forcing many to seek opportunities abroad
- 1.6 m people in country lost jobs in 2021
- UN says country's people have been under assault since military takeover
- More than 2,500 protesters believed to be killed since takeover
- Almost 40% of people in the country living below poverty line

Economic

- Western nations slap fresh sanctions to mark anniversary, targeting country's energy sector and aviation fuel supply
- Inflation rate rose to nearly 20% over the year to July
- Myanmar's official currency *kyat* has fallen 60% since the military takeover
- Volatility and uncertainty continue to weigh on economic growth prospects
- World Bank expects GDP to have grown 3% in 2022, far less than in 2020
- Foreign investor sentiment hit by political instability in Asian nation

3.3 Economic Challenges

3.3.1 Who pays? Developed or Developing countries

- Leading politicians in **developing countries** believed that **a necessary precondition for sustained future development was that developed countries should offer greater compensation for the exploitation suffered during the colonial era**. Large amount of financing is required for public spending on, for example, basic needs such as healthcare and education.
 - This would require hard cash in the form of more official aid and the removal of trade barriers. The removal of trade barriers would allow them to supply manufactured goods to the markets of the developed countries, thereby reducing their dependence on exporting primary commodities of low and variable value.
- While **developed countries** are the ones with more financial resources, their pockets may not as deep as some believe.
 - Events such as the global financial crises in 2008 managed to throw most developed economies into a severe budgetary crisis. For example, in the context of climate negotiations, donor countries have pledged that they will provide \$100 billion in assistance to developing countries for mitigation and adaptation measures by the year 2020. However, this target was never met.
 - More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukraine war had generated repercussions that brought severe financial stress on many developed countries, making them even less ready to help.

3.3.2 Energy Transition

- Climate change pose major difficulties to sustainable development. The cause of climate change is closely tied to energy use. Shifting away from our reliance on fossil fuels towards alternative energy sources is a necessary step to help reduce the impacts of climate change.
- But energy plays a critical role in the economic growth (and indeed for poverty eradication, as 1.4 billion people worldwide are currently without access to energy). Developing countries such as India are therefore not yet ready to more decisively in the energy transition as doing so may slow down their progress towards economic growth.
- Developed countries too are increasingly facing an energy crises, more recently due to their position on the Russian-Ukraine war. While the event has accelerated the need for greener forms of energy, in the short to medium term, fossil fuels will be needed to fill the need for economic activities (as well as basic needs).

Note: There are more challenges to sustainable development that we will learn as we cover more of the syllabus. Be ready to connect them to this lecture when you encounter them.

Box 1: The varied 'ways' to sustainable development

Ghana	Mali	China
Job creation/ decent work	Ensure nation- wide peace, security, and public services	Pursue innovative development and improve its quality and efficiency
Access to healthcare services	Respond to humanitarian urgencies	Coordinated development will form a balanced structure of development
Women empowerment and children's welfare	Organise credible and transparent elections	Promote a green and low-carbon development model and lifestyle
Quality education	Increase governance through decentralisation	Make great efforts to deepen opening- up, for more cooperation
Population dynamics	Ensure a well- functioning judicial system and the fight against corruption	Shared development to improve people's wellbeing
Improved sanitation	Strengthen public finances	China will seek coordinated development in the economic, political, cultural, social and ecological fields in order to build a moderately prosperous society in all respects as planned.
Equitable distribution of wealth	Rebuild economy by strengthening the private sector and agriculture, and investing in infrastructure and youth employment	
Persons with disability	Address the education challenge	
Canada	Ensure access to quality health services for all	
Effective action on climate change	Support cultural projects, a key to "peaceful coexistence"	
Low-carbon government	Promote the role of women in all the sectors	
Clean energy	Integrate environmentalism into all policies and strategies	
Healthy coasts and oceans		
Pristine lakes and rivers		
Sustainably managed lands and forests		
Healthy wildlife populations		
Clean drinking water		
Sustainable food		
Connecting Canadians with safe and healthy communities		

National and Local Examples of Sustainable Development**Ghana**

Intends to reduce its GHG emissions by 15% by 2030. It intends to achieve this by increasing its renewable energy by 10%, improving domestic lighting and cooking technologies, and developing sustainable mass transport systems.

Ghana is part of the Green Cooling Africa Initiative, which aims to use energy efficient methods of refrigeration, as well as adding value to agricultural and forestry products. To address the production and consumption patterns, imports of vehicles over 10 years old are now banned.

China

Aims to combine the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with domestic mid- and long-term development. There are 11 large-scale carbon capture and storage projects and >20,000 companies and organisations now have to report on GHG emissions. Women employed in an agricultural education programme planted new wheat varieties and irrigation management, raising productivity. By 2020, China aims to eradicate rural poverty (55.5 million people).

Mali

A landlocked country, and one of the poorest in the world. Simple measures have a great impact. A new road in a suburb of Bamako resulted in reduced travel times and costs, more school enrolment for girls as they can reach water points more easily, more jobs, and an improved environment by introducing storm drainage systems.

Japan

Japan is aiming to reduce its GHG emissions by 20-26% below 2013 levels. If nuclear reactors, closed after Fukushima, are re-opened, the figure could rise to 30%. Japan has pledged up to US\$1.5 billion for the Green Climate Fund (GCF), enabling poor countries to adapt to impacts of climate change and to reduce carbon pollution.

Canada & USA

Canada and USA have agreed to cut methane gas leaks, which will improve production processes, atmospheric quality, and public health. Coal-fired electricity generation will be phased out as innovations in clean technology are developed, such as carbon capture and storage projects in Saskatchewan and in the oil sands. Canada's target for reducing GHG emissions by 2030 is shown in Figure 4.

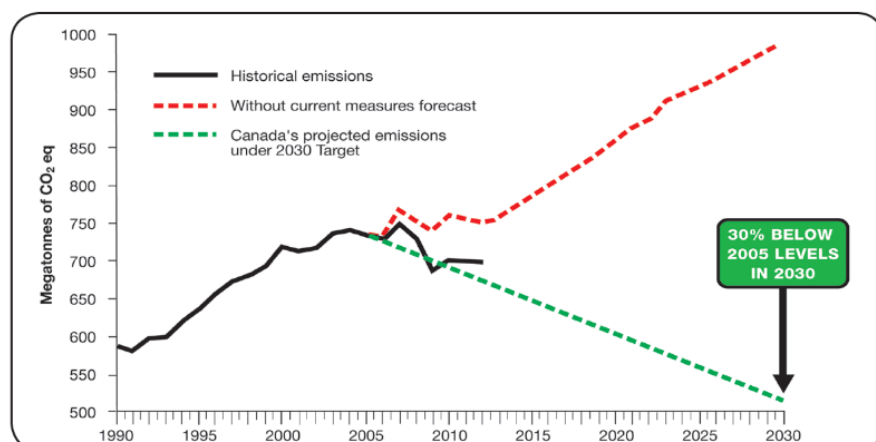


Figure 4 Projected decrease in GHG emissions by Canada