

Discourses on Sustainable Development: The unfinished journey!

Sustainable Development is a very ambiguous term. People define it and understand it differently. The poor people's understanding of sustainable development is far too different from the filthy rich humans. Anthropologists and social sciences educated elites view sustainable development completely different from engineers and physicians while development professionals and community work practitioners are in the "*vuta nikuvute*" [Kiswahili term meaning tension and pulling to each others side] with the policy and decision makers.

To start my essay on discourses on Sustainable Development, I have cited from different sources what people [elite and none-elite] say about Sustainable Development.

- Sustainable Development is not a "boring catch-phrase for sad gits with nothing better to do with their lives", says Jonathon Porritt (BBC 2006).
- ..."sustainable development" itself is a fluid term, having a different meaning for every person who pronounces on it, one-way or the other..." (De Vous 2002).
- ..."environment" is where we all live; and "development" is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable. (Brundtland 1987)
- Development is sustainable where it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs (WCED Report 1987)

With the above phrases sustainable development stays to be the term that connects where we live and what we do to live. The fact that people define the term differently is because every society and culture is not homogeneous and therefore explaining the term in their own contexts and understanding. The Brundtland Commission report "our common future" provides an underline of what can be taken as an overall definition of sustainable development. This definition still, is subject to contextual translations based on different realities and locations and meanings from low level understanding to super human understanding.

Road map of sustainable development discourse

The notion of sustainable development is believed to have started in the 1950s and 1960s during the early environmental movements. The concern then was on the increasing human actions that were disastrous to the environment. The year 1962 is believed to be the landmark of sustainable development discourse. The book *Silent Spring* written by Rachel Carson was the first to enlighten the world on the adverse effect of human actions to the environment. In her book she wrote, “*over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird songs*” (Carson 1962: 103). This book depicts the adverse effects of insect pesticides and DDT in particular, to birds’ life in most parts of the United States at that time. The planning and later usage of DDT as a solution to ant invasion and tree diseases did not have a thorough environmental impact assessment to people and other species.

The silent spring raised a considerable attention especially in the American society. She was not just a scientist that wanted fame but was rather a concerned scientist that wanted to inform the public then on the alarming human activities to the nature. In her biography written by Quaratiello, she reinstates her stand on the relationship between man and nature, and the fact that the environmental destruction done by humans had a negative consequence to humans. In a CBS interview and as captured in her biography she says “*now I truly believe that we in this generation must come to terms with nature, and I think we are challenged, as mankind has never been challenged before, to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature but of ourselves*” (Quaratiello 2004:113). From this biography it is stated that Ms. Carson did not receive the attention she deserved during her life time as she died of breast cancer two years after her book got published in 1964. She laid a foundation on the discourse of sustainable development where by environment and human development is at the centre stage of the discussions.

Ten years after the *Silent Spring* book got published in 1972, the famous landmark took place, the United Nations Conference on Human Environment. This conference came at the right time as environment destruction was increasingly becoming a pressing issue in different countries. Amongst other things that came out of this historic conference was the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This conference provided a common consensus that environment and development were and hitherto two

independent but interrelated issues, yet there was no one term that would encompass the two terms and be able to show this interconnectedness.

In 1972 at the conference the concept of sustainable development started to receive international recognition that nature was an indomitable ally when it comes to human survival on planet earth. The Principle 2 of the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on Human environment reads... *“The natural resources of the earth, including the air, water, land, flora and fauna and especially representative samples of natural ecosystems, must be safeguarded for the benefit of present and future generations through careful planning or management, as appropriate”* (UNEP). Here we see this conference being the breeding ground of sustainable development concept and discourse. From a sociological view, 1972 was a critical year of international transformation in the sense of understanding the relationship between human and the environment.

Now that environmental issues had the UN consent and were receiving the political will at the United Nations level it was time for the member states of the UN to implement the declaration at the national levels. This could have been through putting in place mechanisms at the national level that would facilitate the systematic and legal conservation and protection of the environment while securing livelihood and welfare of the people. Taking into account the growing concerns over the deteriorating state of the environment globally and the consequences it had on social economic development, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution 38/161 that established the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) popularly known as the Brundtland Commission. This commission published the famous “our common future” report in 1987 and outlining the necessary political changes needed to achieve sustainable development (Wikipedia 2008).

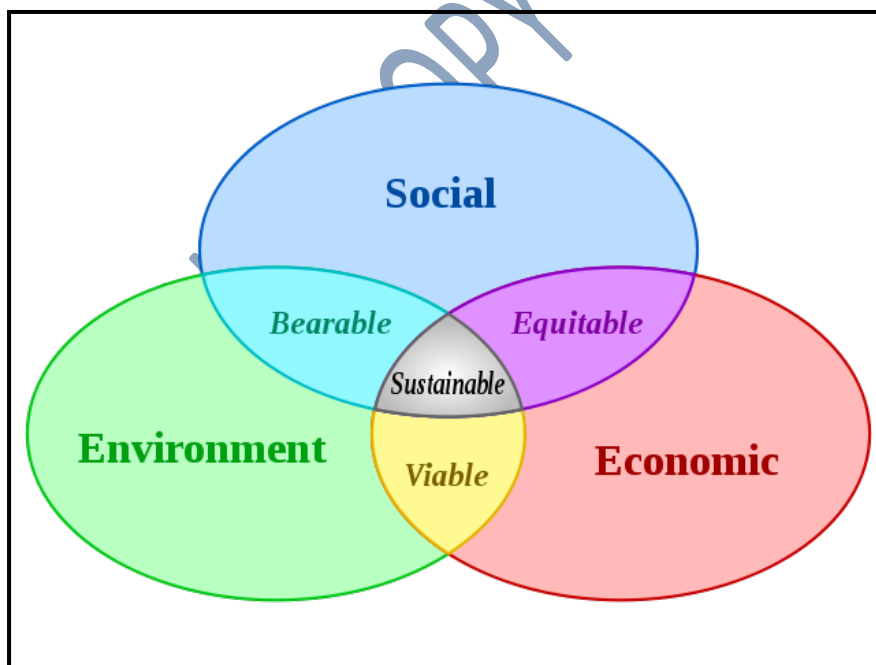
In response to this report the United Nations General Assembly responded with a resolution 42/187 that called for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to be held in Rio de Janeiro Brazil 1992. This Conference was the landmark of systematic addressing of the sustainable development through internationally agreed instruments including the Agenda 21. From the Rio Conference Sustainable Development was formally born and the conference produced five major outcomes namely; - Agenda 21, a 10 year action plan for sustainable development that was to be implemented by member states. Rio Declaration, the main political outcome of the conference. Two UN bodies were established,

the Convention on Biological Diversity and Convention on Climate Change. And last was a set of forestry principles that were to pave the way for a forestry convention (Taking Action, UNEP).

The apex of the sustainable development political process ended in Johannesburg, SA in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). The WSSD was meant to review and receive feedback of member states on the implementation of Agenda 21 within the ten year framework that started in 1992/03. The WSSD did produce one working document, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPI) that describes doable actions and underlines the Agenda 21 and other international instruments including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Civil Society in the South got hold of the Rio + 10 process very late and hence leading to poor representation and participation in the entire process. It was during the Rio + 8 in Copenhagen where it was strongly felt that CSOs in the South should take an active role in the final follow-up of the Agenda 21 implementation by their respective governments (JET 2002).

The perceptions within the discourse of sustainable development

Figure 1¹



¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sustainable_development.svg

Sustainable development can be perceived from different angles, and I will explain few angles that the term has been described. Some describe sustainable development as including the “sustainability” aspect which represent the *carrying capacity* of planet earth, the straining ability of the earth’s eco-systems without reaching the deformation and “development” involving economic growth and the social challenges facing humankind (Wikipedia)

The United Nations 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development declaration refers to the "interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars" of sustainable development as economic development, social development, and environmental protection (United Nations 2002). These pillars are inseparable and highly interrelated. The figure 1 above shows the relationship between environment, social and economic development and the relationships between pillars.

When social practices and ventures are not causing harm to the environment this is referred to as *bearable*. The human production and consumption patterns are significant in the whole quest of environmental protection. Social lifestyles that are not sustainable also play a role in destroying the environment. We need to be careful with all the social practices including production, consumption and lifestyles so that they don’t harm the environment in one way of the other. There is a limit to which the environment can bear to increasing stress caused by our unsustainable production, consumption and lifestyles.

When economic activities are not sensitive to the environment they can contribute greatly to the destruction of the eco-systems. *Viability* is when an economic venture sustains without compromising the environment. “...*the fascination with growth (economic) can perhaps be traced back even further to the accumulation of wealth from the surpluses of settled systems of agriculture...*” and ... *technocentric mode values the natural world as a resource rather than for its intrinsic value*” (Reid 1995:130). The previous phrases underline the different views of sustainable development when it comes to economic interests and environmental protection. Economic growth as portrayed in the first phrase aims at maximizing profit and keep surplus, this in most cases is done in the expense of the environment. The second phrase takes us to the present era of science and technology which has in most cases contributed immensely in the destruction of the environment in the names of improving human welfare through proving electricity through hydro-electric power plants and dams that have

compromised the lives of many species. Time has come that whatever economic initiatives and ventures we put in place should be *viable* in the sense of promoting environmental sustainability while improving the welfare of the people.

The aspect within the three pillars (environmental protection, social and economic) in the discourses of sustainable development is the notion of *equitable*. This is when there is a fair share between the economic growth and how it responds to social challenges of the people. As a student of development, I am confident that the true development only happens when the economic performance has been translated into people's challenges.

The conclusions

“Any fundamental human need that is not satisfied reveals poverty” — Manfred Max-Neef.

This statement reveals what has been a myth to most development technocrats, that every human being is entitled to the fundamental human needs, food, shelter and clothing. Poverty have been defined and redefined in many contexts and locations but an underlining fact is, we need the fundamental human needs met first in order to see sustainable development becoming a reality to the people. To me, absence of poverty is development, and since inaccessibility of the fundamental human needs reveals poverty then development comes when people are entitled to fundamental human needs with direct proportion with what I would call “supplementary human needs” including access to health services, quality education and social security.

When the fundamental human needs are adequately delivered together with the supplementary human needs continuously to the people [...and in the process of acquiring and delivering] without stressing the environment and its natural resources, I would call that sustainable development.

Country plans needs to align to peoples fundamental and supplementary needs, and at the same time civil society plans [in this era of globalization] need to be aligned to country government plans for funding purposes as the Paris declaration demands (Lonnqvist 2006). Sustainable Development will stay to be a myth if global trends are not checked well, adhered to and implemented in order to see equity of resources to the majority poor at local levels.

“One of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of Sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making.”—Agenda 21, Chapter 23

In the course of sustainable development realization, information is a key issue especially to the ordinary people. We all know that information brings knowledge, and knowledge is power. Power comes through being present, presenting ones opinion and a strong sense of

value which I consider effective participation. When our people in developing countries achieve effective participation in the making and execution of decisions that shape our development, only they will be able to conquer poverty and have sustainable development a reality.

When technocentrics, development technocrats, policy makers, decision makers and the ordinary majority poor sit around a huge table and with one spirit, common interests and issues, together fairly prioritise what is best for them only then reality of sustainable development will be around the corner.

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