Sustainable Development: An Anthropological Encounter to the Political Economy of a Development Rhetoric

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The imperative of this paper is to argue that the notion of *sustainable development* (SD)—despite its universal recognition and acclaim—still requires an objective development anthropological scrutiny. There lie several queries behind the notion's anthropological dissection. These are—first, despite emerging as a futuristic environmental conservation doctrine, why SD has become appropriated, and incorporated in capitalist development practices? Second, does SD institute a taken-for-granted and unquestionable approach in *ideoscapes* (Appadurai 1990, 1995, 1996, 2002) of human development discourse? Third, does SD constitute an image of universality—flawlessness in every development contexts irrespective of ethnicity, cultural diversity, and gender relation over time and space? Correspondingly comes the query—does the concept rightfully deserves a uniform universal endorsement (as is observed in recent times), or actually requires to be reviewed through critical and practical reflections? All these questions lead to this anthropological dissection of the worldwide accepted definition of SD that first appeared in the infamous Brundtland Report as *"development that meets the needs of the present without*

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compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" in order to bring out "changes in access to resources and in the distribution of costs and benefits" (UNCED 1987:43-44) over generations.

SD: Development Anthropology Encounters

Encounter to popular development discourses[i] of the sixties and seventies paved some ways to the emergence of development sociology and anthropology. The leap has become instituted through critiquing the notion of 'development' in a postmodernist-deconstructionist fashion. Indeed, Frank's (1969) delineation of the notion as *development of underdevelopment* presented the link of contemporary development with reference to earlier time's colonial plundering of wealth from former colonies, as well as creation of ever-dependent economic systems in those frontiers (satellites). During the Eighties and Nineties, a strong anthropological encounter to 'development' emanated in the Caribbean and Latin American Scene. Mintz (1977, 1985), Escobar (1984, 1995), Escober and Alvarez (1992), Rebeiro (1998), Alvarez (1998), Ferguson (1990), Ward (1990), Sachs (1992), Vargas (1995) and Valadez (1995) presented 'development' as a dead notion, which in many ways constitutes simplistically drawn linearity of binary oppositional discourses— 'developed-underdeveloped', 'North-South', 'haves-have-nots', 'modernized-traditional', and 'pragmatic-prismatic' dichotomies.. To them, 'development' is generally a 'non-word' worth usable within inverted commas only. Frank (2000) gradually stretched the contemporary meanings and semantics of the notion as nothing but a "buy American" (Frank 2001) principle—a consumer ideology that turns the producers of indigenous modes of production to the buyers—the consumers. To Korten (1995), this is an ideological state that helps 'unification of corporations while dividing people' (Korten 1995:270).

Usage and Validity: A Subaltern Critique of SD Approach

Nowadays, overuse of this concept appears to result gradual loosening of its merit. While it would not be fair to treat SD as

merely a buzzword; its overuse indeed raise apprehension of the development thinkers, because they foresee the risk of development activists becoming sustainability-prejudiced, obsessed or biased with the vocabulary. The apprehension stretches far beyond this risk while the titles of development projects (i.e., sustainable social forestry, sustainable coastal zone management or so and so forth some of which might ultimately end up in unsustainable consequences) keep undermining the importance of the processes and means of development.

As well, criticism of SD comes to fore as most development practitioners or activist agencies throughout the world tend to treat the definitive strength of SD with worship-type reverence and veneration. It is commonly observed that the development activists often keep using, over-using, abusing and preaching SD as a taken-for-granted development vocabulary, and anon-questionable paradigm. However, there lie ample justifications for development activists and applied social scientists' to become critical of its indiscriminate usage. Whilst the very essence of 'sustainability' refers to an expectable level of development outcome that would remain unaffected over a longer period of time—the connotation often produces an imagery of a halted state of development after meeting indicators of growth or outcome. The impression it creates somewhat resembles a stage of development symbolizing the 'last', the 'accurate' or the 'most deserved' or 'expected' scale and state of development. The Neo-Marxist perspective viewing the notion as a buzzword indeed has solid grounds in such contexts. Redclift (1987:2), the famous Third-World spokesperson attacks sustainability as a concept with chance of massive misuse by constant referencing, and lack of rigor and objectivity. The question comes along is—whether there persists any other supplementary anthropocentric views detesting SD approach, and whether they stand as valid criticism worth' reflecting for anthropologists? This following discussion, thus, proceeds through furthering of the critiques regarding inherent flaws of the SD philosophy.

Anthropocentric Views of Inherent Flaws in SD Approach

As the primer encounter, Opshoor and Reijnders (1991:8) opine that the very outset of the Brundtland Report—the operational definition of SD—is of qualitative nature, which, in fact, contains abstraction and vagueness in extreme. Jan Bolo, Karl-Goran Maler, and Lena Unemo (1990) perceive that it is possible to interpret the Brundtland definition as demanding "all options [be] preserved, which would imply the preservation of all kinds of resources" (Bolo et al., 1990:13). This might, they say, even lead to the ridiculous conclusion that no oil—or iron or any other exhaustible resource—should be used; that all resources ought to be left for future generations. To avoid any such extreme implication, they recommend an operational definition of sustainability that allows for substitutions and quantification.

Second, SD hardly represents any attention to global politics, which renders countries, regions or localities' 'political choicelessness' in adjusting new knowledge, changing social requirements, or unforeseen developments in the economic and ecological system (see Kuik and Verbruggen 1991; Brink 1991:72). For instance, the SD approach and framework does not answer the question pertaining to 'whose sustainability counts under globalization context?' For instance, expansion of multinational companies into very grassroots of the developing world, and economic outsourcing, as well as exploration-based trading of fuels and minerals of developing countries by the developed world indeed results in financial sustainability of the capitalist world at the cost of compromise of 'social and environmental sustainability' of the Third World. Instances are in abundance throughout the Third World. One classic example is drawn from many entrapment instances of Mexico that undergone several experimentation of "sustainable" development, and eventually ended up in destruction of indigenous economic base, and compromise of "sustainability" of vernacular production process.

For Mexico, the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) treaty presented a soothing policy prescription of sustainable development through export promotion of apparel and electronics. Since the NAFTA treaty signed, US garment, electronic and luxury consumer production has moved to Mexico. The *maquiladora*[ii] manufacturing economy mushroomed the Mexico-US borders. Although the maquilization started in the late sixties in compliance with new economic order (NEO), the NAFTA treaty turned it into the predominant economic development adaptation for Mexico. Ward (1990) shows that, with the expansion of the *maquiladora* shop floors, real wages of the workers dropped to below survival level. The *maquiladora* plants pay the workers a wage level 60% lower than that in the indigenous plants. Thus, failing to keep production cost of indigenous products down, about 3000 indigenous plants were forced to collapse by 1980-1990. Millions of workers of these indigenous plants lost their jobs. As well, by mid-nineties, Mexico turned into one of the most aid and debt dependent country of the world (Vargas 1995:3). These instances refer to lack of political and regional sensitivity in the very notion of sustainability. In a way, it is reflective of sustainable political economic interests of the developed countries at the cost of un-sustainability of the poor countries.

Lopez (2005) presented that the practice of market-focused sustainable development schemes brought out a plethora of adversities in Ecuador. Despite having wealth of natural resource base and diversity, the so called sustainable agricultural prescriptions turned Ecuador into a disastrous place on this earth. About failure of sustainable development doctrine in Ecuador, Lopez writes—"the quality of the environment is disastrous. All the soils of Ecuador have suffered the adverse effects of chemical products used in agriculture, from pesticides to fertilizers. Almost all the rivers are contaminated with organic or inorganic material. All the large cities suffer smog problems, and still another type of pollution, city noise exceeds the seventy five decibels level generally considered dangerous to human health" (Lopez

2005:342). In political front, sustainable political development project in East Timor resulted in gross state failure and furthering of internal and interethnic bloody clashes, and deterioration of transparency and accountability on the part of the state actors (Chopra 2002). Staley (2006) presents that sustainable development doctrine is not aptly functional even in the USA. The paper presents a case study of Santa Monica, California. Staley's (2006) study findings show that Santa Monica failed in accomplishing sustainable development goals, and suffered uneven progress even under politically supportive conditions. To Staley, the reasons of failure of sustainable economic development project in Santa Monica lies in SD approach's over-ambitious environmental focus; and least attention to changing market dynamics. Rudel (2005) presents that macro level projects which were directed toward economic sustainability in Ecuadorian Amazons resulted in intense wage-labour migration causing economic decline and breakdown in indigenous mode of production; and previously existing even and equitable regional development practices.

Third, Redclift (1987) blames that the SD puts little or no emphasis on 'historical processes of development' that will, in turn obscure the ongoing process of destruction of culture and heritage, and plundering and extraction of capital, natural resources and local labour of the South by the North. The SD also has chance of appropriation of new po*litical power* of the North for dominating the South in the name of desired development. In Redclift's (1987) view, the environment alone is not the key factor in making development sustainable; it is political power, and in particular giving power to the workers in developing countries to set their own goals--presumably ones that will not damage their environments as development has heretofore.

For instance, resourcelessness, weakness, over-indebtedness and massive vicious cycle of underdevelopment of the once' colonized countries—be the Spanish occupied Latin America, the British occupied South Asia or the French-colonized Sub-Saharan Africa—is integral part of plundering history of the colonialists

(Mintz 1977, 1985), and therefore, development ventures of these countries cannot sustain without utilizing the learning from the colonial past (Wolf 1982). However, it appears that the futuristic approach of the SD proposition intentionally tends to keep the eyes of the beholders away from the past, as if history has just began, and that future is the only important consideration for development. The tendency of the SD approach toward erasing the contexts of the pasts sometime appear as a neo-colonial capitalist agenda to secure the monstrous growth of the financial capitalism of this time.

Fourth, "environment"—which makes SD the most appealing approach—cannot go unchallenged either. Stanley Carpenter (1991) attacked the environmental ethics of the SD criticizing the Brundtland Report for not adequately distancing itself from neoclassical economic theory. Also, the SD tries to reconcile two irreconcilable goals: to revive growth (at least partly to meet the needs of the world's poor); and to avoid environmental degradation simultaneously. He says that the linking of economics and ecology perpetuates unsustainable systems, because technologies of economic growth are not only incompatible with ecological concerns, they are inimical to them too.

Ecological Anthropology Encounter

Vandana Shiva unveils the fifth wave of criticism from an ecological anthropology perspective. Vandana Shiva's (1989, 1992) biocentric humane view analyzes that SD principle is somewhat responsible for the devastation of ecologically sound agriculture in rural India. According to Shiva, The sustainability thesis fails to recognize that human life is only a part of the whole system of humans and nature life-cycle and spiritual existence, hence, "refers to sustaining not nature, but development itself. "Sustainability in this context does not involve recognition of the limits of nature, and the necessity of adhering to them" (Shiva 1992:217). In short, her criticism refers that 'sustainability' thesis is still a predominantly growth-centred philosophy with a few concessions to and compromise with some crucial environmental

concerns obstructing economic growth. The inherent flaw of is that it stands an upside-down image. It appears greater logical that sustainability would be achieved through SDs philosophical reversal—prioritizing nature than growth.

Critique of Culture and Diversity Proponents

Sixth wave of criticism comes from culture and diversity proponents, especially from Sachs (1989). He asserts that SD, despite being propagated as an epoch-making development philosophy, actually presents an image of anti-diversity project. Sachs (1989) considers the notion of 'sustainability' to be a utopian ideal serving merely the processes of revitalization and reformation of previously popular economic development theses. It also fails to appreciate 'cultural limits' and 'spiritual diversity' to the predominance of production while cultural limits render material production less important for relieving environmental pressure. Sachs (1989) propagates that sustainable development in peripheral societies depends on their cultural limits to production, consumption, distribution and exchange. Sachs also criticizes the 'sustainability' philosophy for assuming in it a false imagery that the opposite of development is stagnation. According to Sachs, distinctions such as backwards/ advanced or traditional/ modern have become ridiculous given the dead end of progress in the North, from poisonous soils to the greenhouse effect (Sachs 1989:7). The crucial point, for Sachs, is the notion of culture; and, according to him, "development always suggests looking at other worlds in terms of what they lack, and obstructs the wealth of indigenous alternatives which they could inspire" (Sachs 1989:7). According to Sachs followers (the culture critics)—SD approach hardly indicates any means or ways to the recovery of material, physical, and economic deprivations and exploitations of people, as well as the loss of the spiritual values that most indigenous peoples are forced to abandon under the expansive surge of globalization-driven development initiatives.

Concluding Remarks

Above discussion portrays that the SD approach is gradually being incorporated into the stream of anthropological contestation. The criticisms appear to affirm that SD approach lacks humane, social and cultural sensitivity that the anthropologists consider an integral part of development, especially human development. Despite the Brundtland Report seems to advocate grassroots development and livelihood promotion on the part of the poor and the marginalized, it resorts to a systematic compromise favouring globalization for development, and advocating environmental and natural conservation for the developing countries. Anthropologists and development activists, as their criticisms sound, invoke the need of a thoughtful revision and rephrasing of SD in light with the realities of people's diverse cultural and social contexts.

Notes

[i] Especially Hirschman's polarization thesis propagating Agrarian South's (Third World) development by means of "trickling down" of development outcomes of the industrialized North (First World).

[ii] The term is a Mexican word (originated from Spanish) conveying the meaning of production houses producing magical volume of products.

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