



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Sustainable Development: Exploring Connections and Contradictions

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### Abstract:

In order to meet the challenges raised by a society in a permanent process of change, specific to the beginning of the 21st century, it is necessary for all its members to change their current mentality focused on immediate crises, towards a state of anticipation of the future, where the health and well-being are ensured as the end point of the sustainable development process.

The theme of development is not new, but in this context, development and sustainability acquire new valences that subscribe to a strategy through which communities seek ways of development and economic growth, benefiting from the role of the environment, which fundamentally contributes to quality of life in the sense that, there where traditional methods generate congestion, expansion, pollution and excessive consumption of resources, sustainable development offers real and lasting solutions that consolidate the future.

A major error of economic calculation - the neglect of the cost of degradation and damage to the environment and human health - has generated costs that must be supported by the whole society threatened with aggravating ecological hazards. The disappearance of forests and implicitly many species of plants and animals, the thinning of the ozone layer, widespread pollution, diseases and poverty are serious dangers hovering over humanity as a whole.

Concerns regarding sustainable development, at the level of each country, at European and worldwide level, are the result of a complex of problems that hover over all of humanity: poverty, environmental degradation, uncontrolled expansion of urbanization, job insecurity, inflation, unemployment and other economic-financial or geopolitical crises.

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### **Introduction**

According to some points of view expressed in the specialized literature, the promotion of sustainable development induces the need for future generations to be compensated for the damage of current activities, so that they benefit from a capital stock - atropic and natural - as important as that existing in present, stock that allows them to obtain at least a welfare equal to the current one (Pearce, 1991: 18). It is also considered "a vector of sustainable goals, by which is meant the aspiration to increase living standards, the notion having a broader meaning than economic growth (Angelescu and Stanescu, 2004: 22), paying more attention to issues inter- and intragenerational equity "(Lariola, 1997: 74).

The introduction of the phrase «sustainable development» in the usual vocabulary of the economic science represented an objective necessity, imposed by the economic and ecological crisis that the world is going through at the beginning of the new millennium, it is increasingly gaining the connotation of the constant economic and social policies of each state, being assigned "over 60 interpretations" (Dăduianu, 1997: 10). In relation to these requirements, sustainable development is a concept "that involves a different treatment in terms of level, approach and understanding, technological complexes and resources that can be used with chances of success, thus acquiring different ways and meanings depending on time and space "(Popescu and Ciucur, 1996: 169).

At the same time, sustainable development can be considered a complex reality, a major challenge on society, a concept characterized by a series of characteristics and even a new paradigm (Söderbaum, 2004: 343), generated by national specificity, more precisely by the concreteness of the situation specific to each country, situation that refers to: population, own needs for development, production and consumption, environment particularities, specific philosophy of life, thus giving the concept of sustainable development, concrete substance and contour.

In this context, "sustainable development must ensure the maintenance and improvement of living conditions for as many members of society as possible, in the conditions of maintaining the dynamic stability for all the components of the macrosystem of the ecosphere, including the macrosystem itself" (Leca and Statie, 1997: 37).

Simultaneously, "sustainable economic development suppose a new attitude towards the ambient environment, changing the relationship between human and nature, in the sense of establishing a new partnership between the two entities, of balance and harmony between them. Sustainable or viable economic development can not be limited to economic growth and ensuring the quality of the ambient environment, but must include the creation of a favorable framework for solving the social problems faced by the individual and communities. Sustainable development represent the form or type of development that combines harmoniously, balanced, achieving economic growth, environmental protection, social justice and democracy "(Dobrotă, 1999: 168-169).

Considering these aspects, we can say that this new syntagma of: durable, sustainable, promotes the conservation and regeneration of natural resources, technological development, increase production and investment orientation to meet the current needs of members of society, without compromising the possibilities of future generations to provide their own needs.

## Sustainable Development: Exploring Connections and Contradictions

We can identify in sustainable development three elements that form it and that must be treated equally. Sustainable development cannot be separated from quality assurance of life and is dependent on the harmonization of the three objectives: economic well-being, with the help of incomes resulting from activities carried out to meet people's needs; the balance of social and cultural systems, through which the necessary labor resources are created for the economic, social and cultural field; the balance of natural systems, absolutely necessary for life to provide natural resources and goods (Rojanschi, Bran and Grigore, 2004: 234).

The analysis of how the influence of sustainable development occurs is based on three aspects: economic, social and environmental.

*The economic aspect.* This is important because ensuring a sustainable economy is capable of producing goods and services, ensuring good governance, achieving an optimal level of external debt, and is able to eliminate differences between sectors. The essence of the economic system is, as it is known, to maximize the amount of goods and services produced, but in terms of maximizing the efficiency with which resources of all kinds are used.

*The environmental aspect.* The sustainable character of a system depends on how to maintain a base of natural resources, on the rational use of renewable resources, based on the principle of using resources that are depleted only after replacements have been identified. In these aspects are included: ensuring biodiversity, atmospheric stability, as well as other ecosystem functions that are not part of economic resources. If we consider the ecological system, the main objectives are given by maintaining biodiversity, as a support for the possibilities of adapting the biosphere to geoclimatic changes. All these have as a fundamental premise the coordination of the objectives and actions of the entities and the functions of each system.

*The social aspect.* The objectives of the social system concern the equitable allocation of goods and services at all levels, local, national and global, involving all members in the development process and maintaining cultural diversity as a basis for equal opportunities and adapting society to changing socio and geoeconomic conditions. We can speak of a socially sustainable system, if it promotes balance in the distribution of goods and services (health, education, culture, gender equality, accountability and participation in political life). The application of these aspects leads to the definition of a strong concept, with a wide applicability. According to the Brundtland Report, we should all be responsible in the actions we make to meet all our needs, but at the same time be aware of the implications for future generations. At the same time, it is necessary to be aware of the influence that our decisions and actions have on the environment, ensuring a healthy environment for all generations. The term sustainable development, as it is presented in the Report, warns us that there are limits to the use of the environment's natural resources, but also that the power of absorbing the biosphere of human activities is limited.

The concept of sustainability must include changes in all aspects of life, and not only in changing consumer behavior, quite difficult process but, above all, must change the way people think about the economy and society (Zaman, 2005: 65).

From an economic point of view, we consider that a number of new ways of administration need to be used, which should consider the environment as a factor of production. If we look at it from a social perspective, we must take into account the way in which society will allow ecological development that involves giving opportunities, but also the emergence of other problems. It must be followed whether the society, the

economy and each of us will accept changes in the way we produce and consume, as well as in the way we live. Sustainable development requires a new way of thinking in society without selfishness, in other words, personal interests must fully coincide with the interests of the community.

There are researchers who consider that the issue of sustainable development must be debated internationally, having a unitary and simultaneous character (Vădineanu, 1998: 189).

There are other specialists who consider that the punctual actions are the ones that will lead to the achievement of the proposed objectives. The practices currently used to ensure the sustainable activity of some segments of the economy, such as organic agriculture, organic tourism, etc. demonstrates the sustainability of the new mode of action at sector level, which is considered the most natural way to approach development. Within a society considered sustainable, the use of human resources at a higher level will lead to economic development, to an increase in the quality of human life.

The challenge launched by Lester R. Brown in his work, entitled Plan B (1998: 337-338), is to build a new economy and do it fast enough, before we exceed enough deadlines imposed by mother nature, as the economic system to start collapsing. The coordinates of this global economic model are summarized as follows: promoting a budget for the restoration (recovery) of the planet, in parallel with the budget for the eradication of poverty; using the opportunities offered by new technologies in order to save resources, accelerate the recycling of materials and strengthen environmental protection, the transition from an economy based on fossil energy resources (coal, oil and gas) to renewable resources (solar energy, wind, geothermal, hydropower, bioenergy and hydrogen); encouraging the transition from a waste economy to an economy based on the reuse and recycling of resources. The use of natural and energy resources must be made by respecting two main ideas: the rational use of natural resources with the help of technologies, and the second which consists in reducing consumption and identifying and using unconventional energy sources.

Based on the above, we consider that sustainable development requires a process of change in which the use of resources, investment orientation, stimulating technological development and institutional changes to be made taking into account the future, but also current needs.

Achieving such an objective involves assuming major responsibilities, respecting some general principles but also some requirements, important being:

- ensuring the long-term sustainability of economic growth for all nations, without exception, as follows: for those developed with reconsideration of the conditions for its development, in order to ensure the quality of the environment and quality of life in general, for those underdeveloped where growth at accelerated rates is a vital issue, the only way out of the economic and social situation in which it finds itself, with the main condition that the chosen type of growth does not become an adversary of the environment and implicitly of human. Thus, the sustainable development in this aspect is in the middle, the goal pursued for fulfilling their desiderates: material, cultural prosperity, as well as physical health depending on the national specifics of each, the established priorities, the means necessary to achieve them, all depending on the existing economic base.

## Sustainable Development: Exploring Connections and Contradictions

- ensuring the simultaneous progress in all dimensions of the sustainable development process, starting from the premise of the interconditionality of the elements related to its internal technology, the health of the population and the environment, which is constituted in the source of support and increase of labor productivity.

This requirement of sustainable development requires solutions aimed at the social, political, economic, demographic and technical alike. Only by engaging its efforts on these plans, sustainable development can be highlighted and measured in terms of efficiency. Any model of development during this period cannot be conceived outside the political options based on scientific arguments provided simultaneously in the economic, ecological, technological and human spheres.

Awareness that the intensification of human activity increases the pressures on the environment, either through the uncontrolled consumption of resources and space, or through the production of waste that nature can no longer absorb without suffering, has led the international community to move to initiate and support concrete actions for preventing, counteracting and eliminating the repercussions of the factors disturbing the ecological balance. If, the main cause of the degradation of the ecosphere is related to the forms of production and consumption of the industrial type society, then the solutions must also be sought from the economic positions, without undermining the importance of other social, moral, cultural agents. In the purely technical and economic logic of development, the environment and natural resources were considered as simple tools for economic growth, being more than necessary to "reconcile the fundamental needs with the justified aspirations of the population" (Popescu, Bondrea, and Constantinescu, 2005: 11).

The message of sustainable development is part of the logic of reconciling the perspective of the economy with nature: without adequate protection of the environment it is impossible to achieve the objectives of development. The damage caused to the environment and human health takes revenge on future productivity and vice versa, without economic growth the resources necessary for environmental protection cannot be procured.

Sustainable development subsumes and correlates the following elements: expansion, growth, progress, development and underdevelopment, (Pohoată, 2003: 9), with dual purpose, economic development and human development. As human development, this sustainable process emphasizes, first of all, that development is made for people and involves their participation in obtaining economic results and in the equitable distribution of income. Income means individual access to the resources needed to ensure a comfortable standard of living; it guarantees the satisfaction of decent personal needs, a normal consumption of goods and services and the social mobility of the individual.

The second feature of human development reveals that economic and social development is achieved through people and, therefore, the human potential must be created and perfected based on investments in people, respectively in the field of teaching, education and culture, vocational training and of health. The level of education is the one that reflects the capacity of individuals to acquire knowledge, to communicate and participate in the social life, of the community of which they are part.

Knowledge becomes the most important factor in creating wealth, but also the most effective means to achieve compatibility between human-made environment and natural environment. This resource of creating wealth - knowledge - can be used

simultaneously by anyone who owns it and can be accessible to the weak and poor, not just the strong.

The equitable distribution of income and investment in people creates the material and socio-cultural framework of people's life expectancy, so that the longevity or ability of the individual to lead a long and healthy life is a fundamental feature of human development. People feel that it is imperative to take an active part in the events and processes that mark their existence and destiny.

A widespread participation, at local, national and global levels, will have a profound impact on all aspects of development: it can give a new impetus to the development process, it can shape a renewed society, more equitable than the existing one and focused on the fundamental interests of individual. In the spirit of the concept of human development, the deepest and most effective form of participation it is access to work and remuneration, which means that a priority objective of human development strategies must be the creation of new jobs, the improvement of the situation of those existing, the revision of the concept of work and duration of work, the extension of the concept of capital, which, in addition to the physical, financial, etc., is necessary to include both human and cultural capital.

The allocation of resources in the new models of viable human development must take into account, to a large extent, individuals and the natural environment, because it is simultaneously national and international and this global vision of human development is the fifth feature of the concept of viable economic development.

### **Challenges of sustainable development**

Carrying out the analysis of the development from the economic-social, but also ecological perspective, allows highlighting some characteristics (Pohoată, 2003: 36):

- the development took place linearly in the evolution of the society from the traditional one to the current one of mass consumption. Many tensions have arisen as a result of meeting the needs at a fair level, while ensuring economic growth the environment has been negatively affected, as observed in the last century;
- by ensuring an economic basis, the term of sustainable development must achieve the elimination of inequities in society and the degradation of the environment;
- it is absolutely necessary to preserve and maintain natural capital so as to ensure a sustained economy and equity between generations;
- in order to ensure the stability and integrity of ecosystems and the maintenance and diversification of species, the increase of the population and implicitly the necessary resources must be limited;
- for development to be considered sustainable, social equity, health measures, educational needs, participatory democracy, must become the main objectives.

Starting from this presentation we can detach what are the new guidelines in ensuring development. For this, it is necessary, first of all, to change the mentality regarding economic growth, especially if the basic conditions are not met. Especially for countries with a high level of consumption this increase is not mandatory, it should not be the main objective. In his works Alan Durning, appreciates that the best for a society is a moderate level of consumption, strong social institutions, but especially a healthy natural environment, to the detriment of a continuous increase in consumption (Durning, 1992: 83).

## Sustainable Development: Exploring Connections and Contradictions

Starting from the essence of the term sustainable development, we can identify several aspects of the term:

- sustainable development occurs as a result of unequal global redistribution, and ensuring efficient sustainable development is not possible without technical progress, changing legislation, ensuring a sustainable market economy, with adequate financing arrangements;
- sustainable development appears as a cause that aims to save the planet;
- sustainable development is considered a concept because it debates an issue, has a frame of reference, imposes operations, involves a multitude of relationships and meanings;
- sustainable development is a system with an order conferred by spatiotemporal fluctuations;
- sustainable development is based on a dimensional quintet (spatio-temporal, social, cultural, economic and ecological dimension);
- sustainable development appears as a process aimed at achieving pre-set objectives;
- sustainable development involves a new way of thinking with an emphasis on possibility, contribution, through notions, judgments, theories and practices;
- sustainable development involves a link between chaos and order, in which human through his intervention generates an increase in the volume of information, while nature is passive.

Sustainable development represents a process that involves solving some problems, some common, general, others are specific. However, the most acute are the following:

- Demographic constraint. Sustainable development is intended to be, first and foremost, a human development, which is achieved by the will of the people and which has as its ultimate objective the assurance of the individual and collective good of all. Everything is thought from the perspective of what population means, that is: the number, structure and health of the population.

The problem became complex as a result of some events among which we mention (Pohoața, 2003: 50):

- the problem of the population, which is both national and global;
- not every increase in population is related to economic growth;
- population density, by regions, countries, etc. does not take into account the type of structure, and fertility soil yield;
- the population explosion occurs, especially in areas where the poverty level is high;
- the demographic explosion generates the increase of urbanization in the area, which causes damage to the environment;
- population expansion occurs with large differences between areas, countries, continents; as an example in Asia there are two thirds of the world's urban population; Africa has the highest rate of urbanization in the world, and faces a lack of ecological and economic balance;
- urbanization in Europe has been concomitant with industrialization, but it is not occurring in all developing countries.

No causal relationship was identified between demographic and economic expansion in all cases. At the same time, it is not an optimal level of the population that would lead to ensuring a maximum of growth. Population growth is both the cause and

effect of economic progress, especially since these two can be affected by the same elements (changes in mentality, disruption of production techniques). (Cypher, Dietz, 1999: 40)

- Technical constraint. From a technical point of view, the situation that sustainable development must solve is: What is the maximum level that can be reached by production, in the conditions of a certain level of technical progress, maintaining the balance of the environment? This problem is justified in the conditions in which it is proved that development implies economic growth, and implicitly, the increase of production. Increasing the size of production almost always generates pollution.

The possibility of environmental pollution absorption is limited, so there is a concern to identify a balance line between these elements.

The analysis of the problem in the context of reality, offers us the possibility to explain some conclusions regarding the sustainable development policy (Platon, 1997: 31):

- The maximum production that can be obtained without affecting the quality of the environment depends on:

- directly proportional to the possibility of absorption of the environment, of the anti-pollution installations to retain the polluting emissions, of the capital invested in anti-pollution installations and the volume of the pollutants or the size of the surface on which the dispersion of the pollutants takes place;

- inversely proportional to the pollutant emissions that are determined by the level of production and consumption.

- Between the action of the factors presented above, reductions can be obtained, based on a different support, depending on the area; thus, in developed countries, with a high level of production and consumption, under conditions of limited absorption capacity of the already polluted environment, production can be reduced; anti-pollution installations and capital investments act in reverse, in the sense that they can increase production; for underdeveloped countries, the two groups of factors act in exactly the opposite way.

- Thus it becomes possible economic development at the same time as maintaining the quality of the environment.

Ensuring the balance between pollution and the possibility of absorbing the environment can be maintained, while ensuring dynamic growth, increasing savings, efficiency of pollution control installations and by increasing the areas or volume of dispersion of pollutants;

- Technical progress can be considered the key element in maintaining an acceptable level of economic development in the conditions of maintaining a quality environment, hence the importance given to anti-pollution investments in development plans that include maintaining and even restoring the environment;

- Maintaining a stable equilibrium point depends on important factors such as: the structure of the economy, production, the level of aging of productive capital, the level of environmental pollution, etc.

- Intra- and intergenerational equity. From the way in which sustainable development is defined, the idea emerges that it becomes feasible only when a spirit of partnership, tolerance, unity and mutual care appears between generations and within the same generation; so that the good and prosperity of one must in no way affect the situation of another. In other words, the sustainable development project generates Pareto's optimum. Starting from the fact that individual utilities cannot be added in order



## Sustainable Development: Exploring Connections and Contradictions

to determine the level of global well-being because, from a practical point of view, you cannot make comparisons of the usefulness of different people because utilities depend on the personal characteristics of each one.

Pareto realized that the optimum, in turn, nor can it be expressed as a sum of individual utilities, nor without taking into account the distribution of income because, given that income is a known element, welfare will be only relative. Thus, Pareto defines the optimal as a position of equilibrium in which the situation of a person cannot be improved without diminishing the well-being of another or others. (Pareto, 1974: 242)

A generation should not be seen as unique, because we can say that three generations coexist at the same time: the young, the mature, the elderly (Pearce, 1994: 45). Starting from this idea, we consider that each of the three elements within the social pyramid has its own cultural matrix. Therefore, the demand is different when compared to the same environmental offer both in terms of level and structure.

Intergenerational compensation it follows from the idea of equity. It starts from the idea that the Earth resource is limited and the current generations through their actions of production and consumption, reduce, not necessarily deliberately, the size of this resource. There is a need to find a compensation mechanism to take advantage the future generations, so as not to be deprived of resources used by present generations. It is necessary to ensure a constant stock of capital so that future generations will start at least at the same level as the present generations, an idea that first appeared in Robert Solow (1986: 141)

- Efficiency. Efficiency can be defined as the ability of a human activity to generate maximum useful effects, for individuals and society, with minimal costs. According to this definition, in order to calculate the efficiency, the effects are related to the efforts.

Both in the case of the definition and of the way of determination we observe an orientation towards the quantitative and, especially towards the economic part of the human activity. Although, in economic theory, it is emphasized that efficiency should also be analyzed in terms of social effects, this is the aspect that is insisted on. Thus, this is exactly the area that sustainable development wants to improve so as to introduce the concept named efficiency. Non-material elements are those that determine the meaning of movement and the physiognomy of development results and should not be seen as elements that threaten efficiency. The importance of profit in the complex of factors that determine the evolution of society cannot be changed. Based on this reality, sustainable development is not and cannot be against efficiency. Its existence cannot determine the elimination of profit from the equation of the evolution of the economy and society. It aims to demonstrate that profit should not only be pursued. Thus, the major problem that sustainable development is trying to solve is to identify the necessary compatibilities between the profit-oriented economic system and the socio-human target of development. The concrete approach to this difficult problem it translates in principle into an attempt to compare the socio-cultural and ecological pluses and benefits with the minuses resulting from additional costs induced by clean industries and anti-pollution technologies.

### Conclusions

We appreciate that the main directions in which action must be taken for sustainable development to take place are:

## MIHAELA LUPĂNCESCU

- climate change - which can generate extreme weather phenomena, with severe implications for infrastructure, property, health and nature, and which are a direct consequence of global warming generated by greenhouse gas emissions from human activities;
- severe deterioration of public health, either due to food insecurity or due to the effects of dangerous chemicals currently used in food;
- the accentuation of poverty as well as social exclusion (valid for one in six European citizens), have direct and dramatic effects on individuals, we are talking here about: suicides, diseases, persistent unemployment;
- the aging of the population with direct influence on the rhythm of economic growth (in the sense of slowing it down) endangering the quality and financial sustainability of pension schemes and public health services;
- the loss of biodiversity occurs at an accelerated rhythm, accentuating dramatically in recent times. Land losses and especially the drastic reduction of their fertility are no longer a novelty in Europe, and the quantities of waste have increased at a much faster rhythm than its gross domestic product.
- the transport networks are extremely crowded and constantly growing, approaching to a real blockage. They primarily affect urban areas, which also face problems caused by the degradation processes of some cities, the alarming expansion of some suburbs, poverty concentrations and social exclusion (Bunea, 2007: 36-37).

To these are added the regional imbalances that are manifesting within the European Union and which remain a serious threat to the sustainable development of the current, present and future European space.

So that the European space can evolve in a sustainable way, the framework of action that must be substantiated involves, first of all, the efficient management of the available resources, for a long period of time and not on conjunctural solutions, and for this it is necessary to define the concrete and achievable objectives for this period of time.

In this process, the role of the required intermediate stages is to allow the evaluation of the progress made, as well as the correction of the registered deficiencies. That is why the objectives set to be achieved in order to achieve sustainable development must be expressed in a very precise way, applicable throughout the entire European space, but at the same time allowing Member States to effectively implement their own viable solutions.

The advantages they offer should not be neglected either. Thus, we can say that through them the field of action of short-term policies is narrowed, thus ensuring one of the priority goals of the strategies for sustainable development, that of leaving a fair inheritance to future generations.

Also, long-term goals, in the conditions of their pertinent and clear definition, unconditionally help economic subjects and private entrepreneurs to plan their future judiciously and profitably, in the conditions in which the material resources of the economies they come from are renewed. relatively slowly, and political uncertainties and instabilities attract their own costs. By clearly defining what needs to be done, the responsibility for achieving the proposed objectives returns with those directly involved in those areas of action. Thus, Romania joined the leaders of the 193 ONU member states at the Development Summit in September 2015 by adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a global development action program with a universal character and which promotes the balance between the three dimensions of development

## Sustainable Development: Exploring Connections and Contradictions

sustainable - economic, social and environmental. For the first time, the actions target both developed and developing countries. The 2030 Agenda includes the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, brought together informally under the name of Global Goals. Through the Global Goals, an ambitious agenda is set for the coming years to eradicate extreme poverty, combat inequality and injustice and protect the planet by 2030.

Europe represents one of the best places to live in the world, and EU member states already hold the top positions on the pursuit of sustainable development goals. However, no state in the world has yet met all the targets set, and, at a serious analysis of the EU's performance on the Sustainable Development Goals, it is clear that the EU must continue to make consistent efforts on all fronts. (European Commission, 2019: 12).

The sustainable development of society is now an undisputed requirement. With a major impact on progress and quality of life, sustainable development is a constant topic of debate, monitoring progress and identifying the factors that influence progress being one of the major concerns of decision makers and not only.

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