

Sustainable Development

A Sustainable Development Network Briefing Paper

What is sustainable development?

According to the 1987 Brundtland Report, sustainable development is: "Development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Sounds nice; how does one implement this idea?

According to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the solution is Agenda 21.

- Agenda 21 is a grandiose plan for action, which includes strategies on a wide range of activities, from reducing poverty and providing drinking water to controlling the world's climate.

According to the billion-dollar elite multinational environmental groups, the solution is global environmental regulations. These regulations are intended to restrict the use of natural resources, to make people consume fewer resources, and to force people to consume products which are made locally.

Would either of those strategies work?

No. Agenda 21 assumes that development is driven by government intervention of various kinds.

- In reality, development is the result of individuals and groups engaging in economic activities that improve their own wellbeing.
- Attempting to enhance development through government projects has primarily served to undermine local entrepreneurialism, has diverted resources to those activities favoured by government officials (often benefiting the political elite at the cost of the poor), and has often harmed the environment in the process.

Attempts at central planning – and Agenda 21 is basically an attempt to centrally plan the world economy – have failed dismally everywhere they have been tried.

Meanwhile, global environmental regulation (also part of Agenda 21, but more watered down than in the proposals of the big environmental groups) stifles economic development.

- Most such regulation is justified on the grounds that there is a far-off threat that will harm humanity and that it is worth paying the economic cost today in order to insure against the threat.
- However, forcing billions of people to suffer today for an unquantified (and probably small or non-existent) benefit in one hundred years time is not merely illogical – it is morally repugnant.

So how can we achieve sustainable development?

The world is sustainable – but the poorest people have benefited less from economic development because they have been deprived of the kinds of institutions that will enable them to become richer and lead happier, healthier lives.

- True sustainable development involves decentralisation of ownership and control -- empowering individuals and communities, so that they are able to take charge of their own lives.
- The simple truth is that development has been *more sustainable* in countries that are now rich than in countries that remain poor; indeed, the wealth of a country is a good proxy for its sustainability.
- This is because the key to sustainable development is the combination of strong institutions, especially property rights, the rule of law, and freedom of contract, and good governance, which entails both decentralized democracy and freedom of speech. These are present in ample quantities in rich countries, but are less common in poor countries.

Since 1900:

- The average person's life expectancy at birth has doubled.
- Infant mortality has fallen by more than two-thirds.
- Food is more affordable for nearly everyone.

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However, poverty and misery is still rampant:

- Half the world – nearly 3 billion people – live on less than 2 dollars a day.
- Nearly 800 million people are chronically undernourished
- 1.3 billion people lack access to clean drinking water and more than 2 million people, mostly children, die of water-borne diseases every year.

But the poverty and misery of the poor are *not* the result of the wealth of the rich.

Some people claim that the poverty of the many is the result of the wealth of the few. That is simply false – a consequence of muddled thinking which supposes that one person's gain must be another's loss. The reality is that almost all the wealth of rich countries has been generated through voluntary transactions between free people.

True sustainable development

For these transactions to take place, for people to improve their wellbeing, and for development to occur, requires certain institutions that underpin *true* sustainable development, especially:

- decentralised ownership and control of resources and other assets;
- well defined, readily enforceable and exchangeable property rights;
- the rule of law;
- free markets;
- small, democratic government;
- free speech.

Sustainable policies and institutions are those which do not prescribe an outcome for society, but allow individuals in society to improve their own wellbeing without harming that of their neighbor. These institutions have largely been adopted by the wealthy world. True sustainable development will ensure that people can improve their own wellbeing, and that people can improve our world, by creating, innovating, and developing.

The misuse of 'sustainable development' and the Johannesburg Summit

The banner 'sustainable development' is typically used to justify policies that would in fact be unsustainable – they would undermine the institutions that lead to true sustainable development:

- Various governments have proposed increasing the level of 'aid' going to poor countries, especially to Africa. The record of past "aid", however, is not a good one. Aid has perpetuated poverty in Africa by reducing the democratic accountability of governments to their citizens and providing funds for corrupt activities.
- Rather than increasing 'aid' financing, the book's authors suggest that levels of 'aid' should be reduced significantly and used much more judiciously to target genuine problems, such as the purchase of medicines to fight HIV/AIDS.
- In part, rich countries – especially those in the EU – are holding out the carrot of 'aid' in a cynical attempt to get the leaders of poor countries to ratify agreements on environmental protection. This is exactly the strategy they used at the Rio 'Earth Summit' in 1992, when they persuaded leaders to sign Agenda 21.
- If the strategy works, it will be bad news because those environmental agreements are likely to do more harm than good to the environment and they will certainly slow down economic development in the poorest countries. Now that is hardly sustainable.

The Sustainable Development Network (SDN) is a global network of organizations, whose mission is to encourage policies which allow individuals to pursue their goals without bureaucratic intervention. The SDN focuses on the institutional framework within which people act, to ensure that policies encourage individuals to make the best use of resources and to protect the environment, while improving both their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others.

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