

# CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS GLOBAL CHALLENGES

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Summary

## The concept of sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development emerged in a response to growing concerns regarding the capacity of global ecosystem to cope with burden imposed on it by a man. Its goal is to eliminate – or at the very least – reduce the imbalance between the economic and social growth, as well as the socio-economic development and nature.

Sustainable development called for a fundamentally new approach towards environmental issues and likewise to development goals and mechanisms. Above all else, it redefined their mutual relationship. The fundamental shift in approach towards the development manifests itself in the fact that it is no longer synonymous with an increased pressure on the environment, as it predominantly used to be the case. The traditional understanding was that the income is obtained by utilization of new territories or increased exploitation of available resources. In majority of cases the ecological and social aspect of costs were ignored. The rise in popularity of sustainable development is based on the fear that if fulfillment of human needs will continue along the established standards, it will – considering the further dynamic population growth – inevitably lead to catastrophe. The dissemination of the sustainable growth concept until the point when it became a generally accepted paradigm was closely bound to the evolution of environmental awareness.

A new quality in sustainable development as a concept shaping the man – environment – economy relationship is the attempt to couple the three, instead of treating them as separate issues, as they were considered before (Dobrzański 2011).

Contrary to opinions expressed now and then, sustainable development should not be looked at as an abstract concept. Rather, it is a set of clearly defined guidelines for modeling the socio-economic growth. The value of this concept is being emphasized by the fact that it became widely known, accepted and implemented. Within the European Union, each activity has to be realized in full conformity with requirements adopted in this concept. At the same time, sustainable development may be considered as a hallmark of the new quality in the man – nature interaction, being a moral and socio-philosophical concept. It goes much further than the classical approach towards the environmental protection.

The definition of sustainable growth was defined in Polish legal framework and it is understood as a socio-economic progress integrating political, economic and social actions, maintaining equilibrium and continuity of environmental processes, with goal to ensure the ability to satisfy fundamental needs of individual communities or citizens, at present and for future generations. The above definition was laid out in Polish *Prawo ochrony środowiska* (*Environmental Protection Act*) established in 2001.

## The history of the sustainable development concept

The concept of sustainable development came into existence in response to awakening of public opinion to environmental issues in 1960's. The term "Sustainable Growth" was coined in early 1970's. Thanks to news about ecological disasters and hazards to the public finding its way to the mass media, awareness of global responsibility for man's actions grew substantially. The unease about the impact people have on the environment became a fertile ground for a new concept.

The issue of consequences to maintenance of status quo in the use of natural resources and danger of their depletion for future generations was raised by – among others – UN Secretary General U'Thant. Thanks to his efforts, on May 26, 1969 a *Man and His Environment* report was published. In it, attention was drawn to impact of growth on nature, the growing pressure on the environment, it's quality and consequences of uncontrolled urban growth as well as transformation of their proximities. U'Thant also pointed to the need for a different approach towards environmental protection, a one which would encourage greater global responsibility for the environment. Within the UN U'Thant created new instruments for that purpose: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Their task is to monitor the progress in implementation of sustainable growth goals.

Similar discussion was started by the report created by the Rome Club (Meadows 1972). The report pointed to dangers generated by the increased pace of industrialization or the demographic explosion, both bound with the problem of famine and poverty, as well as negative impact on the environment (in terms of quality and dynamic disappearance of resources).

On June 5–16<sup>th</sup>, 1972 in Stockholm UN organized a „Only One Earth” conference on environmental issues. Participants expressed the need for scientific research on the subject and the planning was deemed to be a necessary measure to mitigate threats. In 1983, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), a.k.a. the Brundtland Commission was created and drafted the “Our common future” report, which aside from deliberations on contemporary concerns, such as maintenance of world food production levels or reduction of resources needed to be committed by industries, delivered the first definition of “sustainable development”. The report was published in 1987 and it noted the problem of a growing gap between rich countries of the North and poor South.

20 years later, on June 3–14<sup>th</sup>, 1992 the UN organized the Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) in Rio de Janeiro, attended by 30 thousand participants representing 183 nations. Environmental issues were described as particularly important for the poorest nations. The most prominent outcomes of the Earth Summit were:

- Rio Declaration on Environment and Development,
- Agenda 21,
- Forest Principles,
- Convention on Biological Diversity,
- Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The Earth Summit in Rio brought with it concrete provisions regarding the shape of the sustainable development concept. The Millennium Summit organized by the UN in 2000 ended with adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, which relate to fundamental global challenges and define plans for addressing them.

Another large conference was organized by the UN in Johannesburg in 2002 (August 26 – September 4). The conference was referred to as the “Rio+10”. In its course, discussion ensued on the relevance of previously adopted sustainable growth paradigms – it became evident that contrary to declarations made 10 years earlier, certain development challenges deepened, particularly the gap in socio-economic growth between the North and South and ecological consequences of it were stressed. A call for greater civic commitment to realization of sustainable growth was also expressed, and the matter of economic security was raised.

On June 20<sup>th</sup>–22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012 another global conference (called “Rio+20”) returned to Rio de Janeiro. Besides reviewing up-to-date achievements of the international community in implementation of the concept, the aim of the conference was to reaffirm the commitment and further promotion of goals.

In Poland, from the beginning the concept of sustainable development was bound with the process of transition to democracy. In part it was a remedy to decades of wasteful exploitation of environment during the communist rule. Poland joined the efforts to implement the concept of sustainable growth on par with the rest of international community. This was confirmed by adding a sustainable growth amendment to the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland. Adoption of the concept was synonymous with introduction of a new paradigm of environmental protection. It is characterized by a move beyond a passive approach concentrated on establishment of protected areas. Among new tasks defined were stimulation of environmental awareness and prevention.

From the start, the European Union took an active role in support of actions leading to establishment and consolidation of the sustainable development concept. EU considers it to be a universal course of action which should feature in all policies. It is to be a natural foundation of Community implemented solutions – without distinction made between the planning, preparation or realization stages. Conclusions of Rio summit coincided with the Maastricht Treaty, which within its frames stressed the significance of sustainable development to the Union established at that time.

## Global challenges

Global challenges are being described as obstacles to development characterized by universal (global) range or globally acknowledged as being real. Examples of the former are mainly hunger and poverty. Due to their scale and severity, they are usually associated with African nations. Evidence of such problems may be found practically everywhere, even in the most developed nations, although obviously circumstances, scale and potential to counteract differ. The issue of hunger is usually connected with problems of agricultural development, which in turn are determined by natural conditions, including the quality of the environment. In this case it is worth noting the existence of a global chain of development problems, which usually manifest themselves as sets of barriers and not singular obstacles.

Although mankind was yet unable to solve problems known to it from age eternal, there are new dangers to tackle. Phenomena such as international trade of arable land or inadequate oversight of GMO proliferation are recent new challenges. Numerous obstacles to growth present in the modern world are often related to negative aspects of globalization. In this context, one could note the issue of access to benefits from the global terms of trade, as it becomes evident that the direct and full access is a domain of a very select group of the most powerful players. At the same time the remaining majority has a very limited array of possibilities to combat negative effects of globalization. In light of this it becomes increasingly difficult to make a definitive judgment on actions conduc-

ted by international organizations. Oversight mechanisms employed by those organizations seem to only further weaken the position of disadvantaged parties.

On the global scale, one of the fundamental goals of sustainable development concept is bridging the development gap between the rich North and poor South. It is often stressed that the responsibility for pollution of the environment mainly rests on countries of the North, while it is predominantly countries of the South who are left to suffer its consequences. Unfortunately, the poor often perceive calls for implementation of sustainable development ideals as an attempt to shift the responsibility for changes in the environment on their shoulders and subsequently burden them with costs of revitalization.

Responsibility for ecological problems rests – in terms of global scale – unequivocally on the rich North. At the same time, both environmental and socio-economic consequences of established development models are most severely felt by inhabitants of the South. Additionally, responsibility for devastation of environment in numerous African or Asian countries lies with former colonial powers, which very extensively exploited resources of their colonies. In this regard, the sustainable growth concept is being viewed as means of countering injustice suffered by the poorest nations by placing caps on profits stemming from exploitation of their natural resources by corporations based in countries in the North.

From the perspective of global challenges, the responsibility across generations, regions and groups forms foundations of sustainable growth (Kozłowski 2007). Their existence will lead to satisfaction of material and civilizational needs of societies, social groups and individuals, within the frames of fair distribution of finite resources and benefits from nature; simultaneously, they will facilitate balanced approach towards societal vs. individual and local needs.

Sustainable development became one of the most popular concepts of growth, on top of that – one that officially met with so far unparalleled – *de facto* worldwide – recognition (at least at the level of general principles). Over the course of last decades, this type of socio-economic development gained a constant presence in public discourse and mass media. It appears to be a more universal concept, allowing it to be implemented irrespective of geographical location, cultural or civilizational specifics.

## Principles of sustainable development vs. global challenges

Publication of sustainable development principles counted among prominent outcomes of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. They are still current and topical two decades after they were defined. They encompass a wide spectrum of problems and issues, which have a universal character all around the globe. They are relevant to development challenges of poor South countries, but equally to the countries of rich North.

The collection of 27 principles relate to fundamental modern challenges, ecological, social, economic and political in nature. Those principles may be treated as guidelines on how to approach specific problems. Moreover, they very decisively assign roles to diverse parties in order to resolve those problems. Much emphasis is put on the role of countries, although it is made clear that the primary actor in the implementation of sustainable development is an individual person.

The sustainable development concept assigns center stage to individual people. The concept's goal is individual wellbeing and quality of life, regarded as the prime objective. By accepting the sustainable development concept, mankind took on a new responsibility and with it a new place in the global ecosystem. People no longer place themselves above it, as it used to be the case in classical approaches, but accept that they are an integral part of it. Noted was a number of negative consequences resulting from previous approaches in which Earth's ecosystem was indiscriminately exploited. For the sustainable development concept, a mere slowdown in pace – or even elimination of devastation and adverse processes are not considered to be the greatest achievement. It is only the reversal of damages and return of the ecosystem to its original state which may be deemed to be an ultimate accomplishment.

Fair share of principles relate to rights and obligations placed on countries in the process of implementing the path of sustainable development. Reaffirmation of national sovereignty in definition of their own environment protection policies featured as one of equally important outcomes of the Rio summit (principle no. 2). Sovereignty of nations is a right which the UN was called upon to uphold. It has to be said however, that this principle had a decisive influence on the shape of the sustainable development concept. In the text of principle no. 26 there is a reference to the UN Charter and an indication that the UN's role is to serve as a platform for engagement of the entire international community in work on the sustainable development concept. It is all the more understandable that a lot of emphasis is placed on the need for joint actions (principle no.7), or at least coordination of such, with the intent of making Rio's ideas a reality. Also underlined is the role of scientific and technological discourse as a tool in support of building sustainable development (principle no. 9).

Attention is paid to undividable relation between progress and environmental protection (principle no. 4). There are suggestions of perspective waste management in context of wellbeing of future generations (principle no. 3). Both principles unequivocally relate to the issue of exploitive extraction of raw materials, which takes place in countries dependent on economic monoculture and which is currently particularly applicable to countries of the South, although exploitation and *modus operandi* are at the hands of foreign capital – originating in the rich North.

During the Earth Summit, individuals were tasked with a number of new obligations. They are derived from the responsibility for people suffering due to mismatched develop-

ment models disregarding tolerance of ecosystems, which led to destruction of primal productive potential of the habitat (principles no. 5, 6 and 8). One could therefore assume that the fight with poverty (mainly in the context of developing countries, where this phenomenon is widespread) takes precedence.

Hopes of real prospects for implementation of sustainable development concept are predominantly linked to mutual assistance and cooperation in drafting and implementing legislative solutions in the area of environmental standards (principle no. 11). Similar role would be attributed to setting up of an economic system based on new paradigms (principle no.12). At this stage much emphasis was placed on civic engagement in the decision making process leading to laws and their conformity with sustainable development (principle no.10). Civic participation is one of the most basic tools for its implementation.

Sustainable development is a concept perfectly inscribed in the debate on human rights. 4 principles (20–23) list population groups to which special attention should be given in order to ensure just execution of their rights. The groups listed include women, adolescents, indigenous peoples and inhabitants of areas in conflict.

The Rio summit also constituted certain solutions employed for environmental protection. Agreement was reached on the “polluter pays” principle and the need for compensation for victims of pollutions (principles no. 13 and 16). The issue of trans-border pollutions and prevention of their spread was approached in the principle no. 14. Principle 15 promotes pursuit of proactive environmental protection policies and actions beyond mere conservation. The need for real time alerts about e.g. impending ecological disasters was deemed to be of paramount importance (principles 18 and 19). Analysis of the environmental impact is awarded the status of a tool for ecological development (principle 17).

The collection of sustainable development principles would not be complete without guidelines related to political issues. No attempt was made to omit the issue of conflicts and their social, environmental and economic consequences. Each conflict is considered to be a hazard to consistency of growth. Inhabitants of areas in conflict and environment thereof should be placed under special attention (principle no. 24). In this context it is only a natural step to principle 25 which stresses the power of connection between peace, progress and environmental protection.

The above principles of sustainable development contain equally general remarks on shaping relations between men, environment and the economy as well as suggestions on concrete tools which should be employed. It needs to be stressed that none of them has lost their meaning or currency. On one side, it is a measure of success, since a stable list of recommendations was created and proven in various conditions with no need for bringing them up to date in face of changing reality. On another side, there is a sense of disappointment however – unfortunately none of the principles was realized or implemented to a degree which would deem it redundant 20 years after it was presented.

## Conclusion

Sustainable development is a concept which relates to entirety of man's actions and associated interactions with the environment. First and foremost however it is a certain type of socio-economic growth, which was in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century deemed necessary in order to avoid the threat of global catastrophe.

Participants of the Earth Summit left the venue sharing a very optimistic view on real chances for implementation of adopted solutions. The post-summit reality was substantially more complex, however. Although appropriate steps are taken in number of areas, the pace at which they are carried out does not correspond with needs. There are attempts to attribute certain failures to global crisis but they are not an overriding cause responsible for all delays. The biggest problem still relates to human rights. Equality is still not taken for granted as it was put forth by creators of the sustainable development concept. It is difficult to explain this with a mere economic inequality or even cultural or civilizational differences. Such problems are still present in reality of the rich North as well as the poor South, or to put it differently – the west and the east.

Implementation of the discussed concept requires a lot of effort and it will do so in the future. Legislative and economic tools alone will not suffice. For this reason extra attention should be placed on education of mankind's responsibility for ecological, social and economic consequences of its activities. Staying true to that condition will in the future allow for greater success in implementation of the sustainable development concept.

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