

# National and Global Challenges for Sustainable Development

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Let me first thank the Organizing Committee for inviting me to speak at this event. I consider it as a great privilege to deliver the keynote address at this Research Sessions.

It is seen that a wide array of scholars will disseminate knowledge in various sessions that will serve to promote the importance of sustainable development. It is sincerely hoped that the positive insights garnered during these sessions will play a role in shaping a strategy for sustainable progress.

The University of Peradeniya is one of Sri Lanka's premier higher educational institutions. The University has played host to many of the nation's visionaries, from all corners of society. Its corridors are frequented by individuals with burgeoning intellect and capacity. Here reside the influential shapers of tomorrow's generation, the individuals with the capacity to not just absorb knowledge, but to utilize what is learnt to suit a practical setting. There is no better venue in Sri Lanka for a session on sustainable development – an issue so crucial to our society.

Robert Lynd, the celebrated Irish essayist, once wrote "*There is nothing in which the birds differ more from man than the way in which they can build and yet leave a landscape as it was before.*" Lynd – by juxtaposing humanity and birds – effectively captures the crux of the move towards sustainability. Sustainable development envisages a shift towards practices that minimize our footprint on resources. It envisions a future where humanity's progress is based on cohesion, where the pursuit for development does not leave an impact on the environment – just like the birds caricatured by Lynd.

The address, firstly provides a brief overview of the origins and evolution of the sustainable development movement, and secondly, perspectives regarding the future of the movement, on an international and national scale.

How does one define Sustainable Development? The term is often used to represent a plethora of development factors without really placing an onus on exact

connotations and implications. In its primitive form, sustainable development deals with humanity's societal growth and the corresponding interactions with the ecological environment. However, current definitions of sustainable development have broadened to encompass almost all aspects of development which are dealt with below.

## **History**

Some of the earliest records of sustainable development arise in the manuscripts of Plato in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC and Pliny the Elder in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD. These authors, of classical pedigree, not only talk about the concepts relevant to environmental degradation. They also elaborate strategies that can be followed to “maintain the everlasting youth” of the earth.

While the concepts regarding sustainable development have been in discourse for millennia, the actual term ‘sustainability’ has recent origins – in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was the age of Exploration; the European superpowers were competing against each other for naval supremacy and industrial prowess. Such ambitions required copious quantities of wood – the primary resource used during that period. The tremendous demand resulted in severe shortages. Fears that a shortage would erode national competitiveness became profound. Such anxieties led to the creation of a movement that called for the responsible use of resources. This interpretation of sustainable development, as a means to prolong progression while maintaining the current status quo as a bare minimum, heavily influences the modern interpretation of the term sustainable development.

The impact of the Industrial Revolution on the concept of ‘development’ cannot be understated. ***The industrial revolution legitimized the belief that it was moral to maximize economic production without much consideration for the environment.*** It created a perception that for goods to be marketable, they had to be molded by industry. The ramifications of such assumptions are still felt on our day to day life.

The Industrial Revolution ushered in a period of unprecedented growth. Between 1800 to 2000, the world's population mushroomed from 978 million to 6 billion. Global growth rates hovered at around 3% to 3.5% in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and accelerated to around 5% in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Global manufacturing capacity increased by approximately 1800-fold. ***Prolonged booms created expectations of unbridled, linear growth of affluence.***

As industrialization proliferated globally, the wanton use of non-renewable resources continued unabated. Resource dependency, pollution and social inequality became conundrums that could no longer be avoided, they became pan-national dilemmas. Scepticism regarding linear growth theories began to rise. There was genuine fear that future generations will be deprived of an opportunity to maintain living standards. Thus, the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the re-emergence of the call for sustainable development.

What caused this shift in the discourse on development? The shift was no sudden start. It was a gradual movement fuelled by various factors.

Initially, the ‘United Nations Conference on the Human Environment’ of 1972 played a significant role in raising public awareness. Sustainability featured heavily in this conference. The priority given by the United Nations, the apex multilateral organization, created further interest on this relatively novel subject.

Furthermore, scholars attribute this change in perception to the global recession sparked by the first oil crisis of 1973. The recession was particularly prolonged; estimates suggested that definite signs of recovery only will emerge in the late 1980s. This crisis and subsequent recession raised awareness on the repercussions of a resource shortage on economic growth.

However, it was the report titled “Our Common Future” published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), often referred to as the Brundtland Commission, in 1987 that seriously advocated Sustainable Development as an essential global strategy.

The Brundtland Commission was crucial as it provided a widely accepted definition for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development was defined as “*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”. This became the ‘classical definition’, one that widely shaped future work in this field. Furthermore, the acceptance of this report titled “Our Common Future” by the United Nations General Assembly gave this definition political salience and scholarly impetus.

Until then, ‘development’ and ‘sustainability’ were viewed as relatively conflicting ideas. Sustainability was interpreted as the ‘protection of resources’. Development was linked to industrialization, which was perceived to be the ‘manipulation of resources’. However, the shifts in perception resulted in the creation of “Sustainable Development” as a viable growth strategy and a compromise between two seemingly divergent viewpoints.

The release of this widely-publicized report resulted in sustainable development ranking high in the agenda of most nations. It created a foundation for future commissions and conferences to work upon and the convening of the 1992 Earth Summit and the adoption of Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration and to the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development where it was argued that **“nations had to improve economic efficiency, protect and restore ecological systems and enhance the well-being of the people”**. They tackled sustainability across three dimensions: **the environment, the society and the economy**.

The corporate sector embraced sustainability in accordance with the three components of sustainability – economic, social, and environment – emphasizing People, Planet, and Profit – the Triple Bottom line.

The discrepancies in existent growth theories, coupled with increased awareness regarding the harmful effects of existent strategies, sparked a movement calling for a change in thinking.

## **MDGs and SDGs**

### **MDG**

The move towards a Sustainable Development platform has gathered pace since the dawn of this century.

The “United Nations Millennium Declaration”, signed in September 2000, was a momentous push for Sustainability. The declaration, ratified by 189 world leaders, focused on eight goals for Sustainable Development. Concurrently, 18 measurable targets were set to provide nations with a measure of progress. These goals, commonly referred to as the Millennium Development Goals, were to be achieved by 2015, with a new declaration.

The MDGs did bear sizeable dividends. Absolute poverty rates, which hovered around 50% of the world’s population was reduced to approximately 21%. In other words, we have been able to alleviate more than 700 million people from poverty in fifteen years.

Infant mortality rates declined considerably, from 90 deaths per 1000 births to 43 deaths per 1000 births. Gender equality in education has also showed considerable improvement: in 1990, only 74 girls for every 100 boys were enrolled in schools in South Asia. Fifteen years later, estimates suggest that there were 103

girls for every 100 boys in schools in South Asia. This is a phenomenal accomplishment achieved in a short time span.

However, the project did suffer from drawbacks. Targets were over-ambitious and plagued with data discrepancies. There was a lack of cooperation between the developed and developing nations.

## SDG

Just over a year ago, during the proceedings of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, 150 world leaders adopted the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. Consequently, 17 new goals, referred to as the “Sustainable Development Goals” were set in place. To monitor progress, 169 targets were identified and are slated to be achieved by 2030. The targets are subdivided according to five critical areas of focus: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership.

The SDGs are indeed a more comprehensive, sophisticated successor to the MDGs. However, it is one thing to set ambitious targets. It is another to actually accomplish them.

What is hindering the efforts in achieving these targets? In this connection there are many factors, both international and national, that have to be addressed.

### **Challenges: International**

#### *Trust*

The success of multilateral ventures depends on the trust placed amongst participants. If nations find it difficult to establish a cohesive relationship, collaborative efforts will be placed in jeopardy.

The Millennium Development Project had some fleeting success in allaying trust issues. However, differences began to emerge early, especially regarding the opportunity costs of sustainability drives. Calls for sustainability mainly came from affluent, developed nations. They were aiming at re-altering global perceptions of development along a sustainable paradigm that views industrialization from a different perspective, which was in contrast to their development and planning several decades ago, which placed a tremendous strain on resources, and hardly any initiatives to minimize adverse environmental

impacts. In stark contrast, several emerging nations still view industrial development as a panacea for growth. Thus, it comes as no surprise that these emerging nations view calls for sustainability with suspicion. Certain facets of sustainable development are perceived as ideologies imposed to sustain the gap between the developed and the underdeveloped countries.

In addition, there has been a critical deficiency in the promised flow of assistance. An overview of the Millennium Development Project attests to this fact. For instance, there was a 59% deficit in the allocation of Official Development Assistance funds. Nations with limited resources feel that shortfall in aid undermined their initiatives. Donor nations however feel vindicated: they opine that their contributions were asymmetric; they were providing funds with significant domestic opportunity costs to countries too complacent with the aid given.

However, in the case of Sustainable Development, the apprehension that states pursue Machiavellian manoeuvres is perhaps ill-founded. The shift towards Sustainable Development was no sudden start; it was a conclusion arrived at after centuries of excessive resource depletion as described earlier.

To rid qualms of deep seated ill-intentions, affluent nations have to show their commitment to sustainability. Imposing stringent self-standards, especially in regard to emission levels, will go a long way in alleviating mistrust. Furthermore, affluent nations should continue to providing assistance – of commercial and non-commercial type – to developing states in order to strengthen the latter's efforts in realigning growth strategies.

As states engage in and trade accusations, all stakeholders lose. Identifying common ground is essential, and it is only through dialogue can commonalities be discerned. Only through dialogue can an unequivocal consensus be reached.

Overall there has been considerable progress in this front. Recent developments regarding the “Paris Agreement” on Climate Change is an ideal example. It is heartening to see that ongoing negotiations to resolve disputes have proven to be fruitful. China and the United States – the largest emitters of greenhouse gases – have come to a consensus regarding emission controls, subsequent to prolonged dialogue. Consequently, there has been a surge in the number of countries that have ratified the Agreement.

Sri Lanka too has taken steps in this regard. The Cabinet of Ministers recently approved a proposal by President Maithripala Sirisena, in his capacity as the Minister of Mahaweli Development and Environment, to ratify the Paris

Agreement. This initiative clearly shows Sri Lanka's commitment in fulfilling its pledges towards sustainable and co-operative development.

The success of international initiatives, like the 2030 agenda, hinges on nations' enthusiasm in fulfilling stated goals. It also rests heavily on nations' ability to engage in fruitful dialogue. Sustainable Development is a pan-national endeavour, one that can only be fulfilled by neutralizing the mistrust and discord. Only through working in unison can we make headway in fulfilling our obligations for future generations.

### *Data Collection*

Most developing nations, Sri Lanka included, are plagued by issues that arise from the use of inconsistent and irregular data collection mechanisms. Goal setting strategies are contingent upon the ability to maintain an accurate track of progress. Inconsistency results in a lack of accurate data necessary to develop viable indicators. Irregularity exacerbates issues, as outcomes of initiatives become apparent only after a lengthened time lag.

Furthermore, data discrepancies mean that set targets and strategies may not be best suited for the given scenario. The onus will be thus shifted away from initiatives that require the most emphasis. This factor is especially detrimental to poverty alleviation measures. The neediest become invisible – they will continue to languish in the depths of poverty while nations work on initiatives around them.

“Leave no one behind” is the clarion call for the Sustainable Development Project. With this being the case, nations must work diligently to ensure that data collection mechanisms emphasize accuracy and are regularly updated. Doing so ensures that each and every nation has the necessary infrastructure to find those citizens “left behind”. The challenge for the global community is to build partnerships of technical assistance under SDG Goal 17 to address the issue of data constraints, particularly in developing countries.

### **Challenges: Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka's efforts in working towards Millennium Development Goals have been encouraging. Recent reports suggest that the island nation was on track to reach more than 90% of the stated goals. Particular success has been experienced in reducing poverty, widening healthcare coverage and in broadening primary

education. Such encouraging feats were achieved in no small part due to state welfare programs set in place by successive governments, spanning all political affiliations. Due to the positive steps taken, Sri Lanka stands as a positive model for sustainable development in the region.

However, while these successes are laudable, enthusiasm has to be reserved. The nation has faced issues in achieving certain development targets.

### *Regional/District/Declies – Disparities/Inequalities*

For instance, like most other developing nations, Sri Lanka suffers from regional inequality. Development has been asymmetrical: considerable variance exists when comparing development amongst districts. The districts of the Western Province – Colombo, Kalutara and Gampaha – outperform other regions in almost every indicator.

There is ground to argue that the Western Province's dominance over Sri Lanka's economic output has been decreasing. Over a ten year period, the Western Province's contribution to annual output has decreased by 7.5%.

However, this decrease in influence has not translated to increased opportunities for all other provinces. For instance, over the last ten years, the Central Province's contribution to aggregate GDP has only marginally increased – from 9.7% of aggregate GDP in 2007 to 10.2% of GDP in 2015. A similar stagnation is evident when examining the Uva Province: total provincial contribution increased by only 0.3% of aggregate GDP between 2007 and 2015.

Although poverty has declined in the country over the last two decades, the poverty levels in the estate sector remains relatively high. In addition, districts such as Moneragala, Ratnapura, Badulla, Kilinochchi, Mannar, and Mullativu still languish behind in terms of poverty (above 10%), maternal health and secondary education. 21.6% of Children below 5 years in Sri Lanka are underweight and in the estate sector the percentage is close to 30%. The share of household income of the poorest 10% of households remained less than 2%, while the corresponding share of the richest 10% remained close to 38% during the last two decades.

Such inequalities need to be rectified as a requisite for a stable, sustainable development trajectory and remains a challenge.

## *Gender Inequality*

It has to be noted that regional disparity is not the only inequity observed. Sri Lanka has not made much headway in reducing the gender gap amongst citizens. We take pride in the fact that Sri Lanka was the first sovereign state to elect a female head of state. However, this achievement shines the light away from deeper issues at hand.

Women account for 52% of the total population. In addition, 20% of households in Sri Lanka are headed by women. Furthermore, approximately 11% of women hold an A Level degree while only 4.5% of men hold a similar educational qualification.

However, despite such demographic and educational advantages, women account for only 30 to 35 % of the workforce. Moreover, the unemployment rate for women is twice as high as the rate of unemployment for men. Most women work in the informal sector and as such are more exposed to abuse and exploitation.

The stark gender inequality in the labour force understates the critical role that women play in shoring the Sri Lankan fragile economy. It is the toil of women in the plantation sector, it is the remittance of Sri Lankan women abroad, in paltry conditions, away from family, that consolidates its foreign exchange. It is the skill and dexterity of women in factories that sustains the textile and garment sectors. In all these instances, the role of women has not been given due recognition. This discrepancy needs to be corrected before tangible steps are taken on the path to sustainability.

Sustainable Development mandates for a strategy that ensures no one is left behind. Therefore, it is of great importance that Sri Lanka works to rectify the disparity hindering the progress of the silent majority. Sri Lanka as a nation, must ensure that each and every citizen, regardless of ethnic, geographic, and gender differences work together, in unison, to ensure equal opportunities for all citizens, spanning all generations.

## *Energy*

In respect of matters regarding energy and the environment the following issues have to be addressed.

A breakdown of Sri Lanka's energy sources paints a somber picture. Less than 10% of total energy production is through renewable resources. In fact, Sri Lanka's dependency on biomass and thermal energy is quite concerning. Biomass consumption, particularly of organic products such as firewood and coconut shells, satisfied around 40% of total energy requirement in 2014. Thermal energy – constituting coal and petroleum derivatives – accounted for approximately 60% of Sri Lanka's aggregate electricity generation in 2014.

This dependency places an immense strain on the nation as it leads to depletion of domestic resources. Furthermore, the malignant effects of carbon consumption may hasten environmental and health deterioration. Thus, a shift away from carbon derived energy is highly essential.

Such a shift changes the dynamics of energy politics as well: Sri Lanka will be less dependent on the exports of fuel from volatile, oil rich nations. It will also reduce the outflow of foreign exchange that has exacerbated the issue of currency depreciation.

In fact, Sri Lanka stands to gain immensely from technology advancement in solar power generation. The nation's position in the equatorial belt provides it with a relatively homogenous climate. Furthermore, there is only a 20% variance in solar radiation readings island wide. This reduced variance in temperature variations, combined with the low cloud cover in dry zones, provide ideal conditions for the use of solar as an energy source.

There has been a steady rise in interest in this field. Many have taken the initiative in adding solar generation capacity to their households. The government has also organized ventures to promote interest amongst the populace. For instance, the "Soorya Bala Sangramaya" project commenced by the Ministry of Power and Energy two months ago, under the auspices of the President, aims to establish micro solar units in a million households. Such initiatives, designed to encourage and foster shifts away from non-renewable energy, needs to be appreciated. The next should be to embark on wind power generation, which will remain a challenge.

## *Environment*

Unfortunately, Sri Lanka's performance in terms of environmental conservation leaves much to be desired. Post-independence, the island nation has been experiencing a rapid degradation of natural resources.

As of 2012, forest cover only constitutes for 29% of Sri Lanka's surface area. This value, diminished as it is, has been decreasing at a precarious rate over the past decades. During the period 1990-2005, aggregate forest cover reduced by almost 18%; at a rate of 1.05% every year.

Environmental degradation is of great concern as Sri Lankan society is particularly susceptible to swift changes in the environment. This is evident when one examines the domestic demographic breakdown. More than 30% of Sri Lanka's population resides in the coastal region. These areas are fed by shallow lenses of fresh water, in aquifers, saddled amidst saline water. Therefore, fresh water sources are particularly threatened by over-extraction, pollution and salt water intrusion.

This is particularly true in the Northern Province, a region which depends on ground water in limestone aquifers for water supply. Research suggests that the rate of replenishment in aquifers is at an all-time low due to over-consumption and land development. Tinkering with sensitive areas such as this carries tremendous risk as even a minute shift in the topography will have unimaginable consequences on the local populace.

The nation has a high degree of endemism and sensitivity. Thus, matters pertaining to the environment have to be treated tactfully. As Sri Lanka gears for rapid economic development in the coming decades, the need for the implementation of an efficient mechanism for sustainable development becomes crucial. Economic growth should not come at the cost of the country's unique biodiversity.

## **Conclusion**

George Perkins Marsh, often considered as one of the founders of the sustainability movement once said, "*Man has long forgotten that the earth was given to him for right to use, not destruct, still less for reckless waste*".

Global development over the past few centuries attests to Marsh's observation. The obstacles littered on the path to sustainability have been a consequence of our own profligate practices.

However, as a collective society, it appears that the globe has finally understood the importance of realigning policies to cater towards sustainability. There has been a global paradigm shift towards sustainable development, and this is evident when examining nations' commitment towards the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals.

The response has been lukewarm in certain cases, but one should not lose enthusiasm. It took around half a century to change course. To expect changes within a few decades is over-ambitious.

In conclusion the words of Helen Clark, administrator of the United Nations Development Programme becomes relevant. During the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, she observed that, *“Ours is the last generation which can head off the worst effects of climate change and the first generation with the wealth and knowledge to eradicate poverty. For this, fearless leadership from all is needed”*

Fearless leadership requires no title, no position, no rank nor status. Fearless leadership only requires a resolve to commit wholly to an endeavour.

It is sincerely hoped that the knowledge shared in these Research Sessions will inculcate leaders of today and tomorrow with a resolve to provide fearless leadership in the movement towards sustainability.

Again, I would like to thank the organizers for selecting me as the keynote speaker for this session. I give my best wishes for the event's success.

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