

“Development” matters in “sustainable development”:
the human development and capabilities approach
and sustainable development

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Advance abstract

Oman and Wignaraja (1991) call those development thinkers who emerged during the late 1960s and who are primarily concerned about poverty and inequality Reformist against those who regard development as industrialization or those who regard it as expansion of income. The Reformist identified such crucial issues as working poor, informal sector, the absolute poor, relative poor, and basic human needs during the 1970s and further developed later human development index, human security, basic capabilities, etc. It was the Reformist who identified “sustainable development” in the early 1970s. As an application of sustainability to development, it meant that efforts should be made to satisfy the basic human needs (or basic capabilities of individual persons according to Sen (1979),) of the poor in developing countries by reserving natural resources and environment of the Earth for this purpose.

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The definition of sustainable development was officially made in 1975 by the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme based on the discussions made in the Cocoyoc Declaration in 1974 with the sense of “human family”. The definition was maintained until the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, although this report changed the word for the basic sense from “human family” to “our common future” which had been used by Willy Brandt in 1980 as the common future of those in developing and developed countries.

However, because the annotations to the definition of sustainable development, especially the meaning of “development” as satisfying basic human needs, was ignored by the diplomats and others who were engaged in the preparations for the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development, “sustainable development” was now thought to be a vague concept. However, in 2002 the World Summit on Sustainable Development gave a new definition “with the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development – economic development, social development and environmental protection”. These contents were further enriched by the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 and in the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Thus the currently used redefined “sustainabledevelopment” is different from the original “sustainable development” – crucially with the understanding of “development”.