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# The Permanence of the Sustainable Development Complex

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The Permanence of the Sustainable Development Complex  
Research Essay

Christopher Ginou

## The Permanence of the Sustainable Development Complex

Sustainable development has remained the uncontested practice of equitably balancing the progression of economic growth, environmental protection, and social equality. Limited credit or acknowledgement has been granted to alternative perspectives to better balance the significance of the three pillars correlated elements of human subsistence. Current global consumptive behaviour has been proven unsustainable, signifying a need to adopted alternative lifestyles before more permanent damage is done to the earth's ecosystems.<sup>1</sup> This paper will provide insight into why sustainable development has been continually viewed as the best practice in order to protect and preserve the environment, which has proven to be exploited unjustly by individuals and corporations. Multinational corporations and developed state citizens continue to lobby governments to continue a similar course of development in order to avoid disrupting the current status quo of business and personal conduct. Alternative perspectives to sustainable development will be investigated to recognize reputable practices that would care for the preservation of the environment more significantly than sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) implemented by the United Nations (UN) and the initiatives set after the most recent United Nations Conference for Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Conference of the Parties 21 (COP21) held in Paris will be assessed to determine whether or not these developments perpetuate the use of sustainable development as a means to enhance the consideration for the environment, or if some alternative is being tested to see if it will be more successful in securing the environments wellbeing. Problematically, sustainable development remains the uncontested discourse to cope with the difficulties of environmental degradation and social injustices. Economics trump social and environmental concerns when

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<sup>1</sup> François Schneider, Giorgos Kallis, and Joan Martinez-Alier, Crisis or Opportunity? Economic Degrowth for Social Equity and Ecological Sustainability pg. 511

decisions are being made. The initiatives from the recently developed SDGs and COP21 in Paris signify the continued permanence of sustainable development. However, these two events have also demonstrated a more equitable alignment of the three pillars that constitute sustainable development policy decision-making.

### **Perspectives of Sustainable Development**

The development of environmental sustainability created a permanent sustainable development complex that has since become embedded within business culture, the global economy, and the international institutions. This sustainable development complex refers to a permanent and unrivaled practice to improving the stability of the earth's atmosphere and environment that has yet to achieve its goal. One of the arguments that support the continual pursuit of environmental stewardship via sustainable development is based on the grounds that in a majority of policy maker's minds, there remains trust in the efficiency of the market to adequately resolve any disequilibrium between economic growth, environmental protection, and social injustices.<sup>2</sup> Rationalists like Theodore Panayotou have argued that it is not economic growth that leads to environmental degradation; instead it is inefficient governments that lack adequate institution and legislation causing an increase in environmental and social distress.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a rationalist's account of sustainable development would highlight that as states develop economically and income per capita rises, consumers can demand more environmentally mindful products and cleaner infrastructure to relieve stress on the environment as well as the ensuing social instability.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective sustainable development provides economic growth with the intention of simultaneously improving the long-term safeguards for the

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<sup>2</sup> Evonne Moore, Economic Rationalism and Sustainable Development pg. 2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Panayotou, Economic Growth and the Environment pg. 3

environment and society. Meaning that the most developed states should reach pivotal point of per capita income that shifts market demands to green alternatives. Thus indefinitely creating a more efficient set of practices that can be utilized to continue the similar lifestyle and business conduct that developed state citizens and corporations have previously experienced. Numerous policy makers within international institutions and businesses have adopted this vantage point in order to continue the “business as usual” consumptive habits and fuel uses that allow individuals to neglect their correlation to their impact on the global environment.

Additionally, there has been a noticeable socio-constructivist trend emerging that depicts that “environmental education is being significantly altered by globalizing forces, [...] convert[ing] environmental education into education for sustainable development.”<sup>5</sup> Scholars like Paulo Freire would argue that a critical pedagogy to sustainable development has yet to be established because of the embeddedness of neoliberal principles within sustainable development, which has constructed a great deal of dialogue in the international negotiating arena.<sup>6</sup> From this, examples can clearly depict the superiority of the sustainable development discourse over that of environmental education programming and other alternative views, which amplify the consideration of environmental protection and social welfare. Due to this constructivist shift that has embraced sustainable development as the new means to balance the preservation of economic development, environmental protection, and social justice, this ironically demonstrates that sustainable development has unevenly allocated resources to preserve the three pillars that it claims to equitable considers in policy decision-making. Sustainable development’s perspective through multiple lenses perpetuates the continued use of

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Haas, *When Does Power Listen to Truth? A Constructivist Approach to the Policy Process* pg. 571

<sup>6</sup> Peter McLaren and Paulo Freire. *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* pg. 25

the concept in an attempt to remediate the historical degradation of the environment and inadequate societal support.<sup>7</sup>

### **Permanence of the Sustainable Development Discourse**

The origins of sustainable development can be traced back to the Bruntland Report of 1987 and the Report of Our Common Future have revolutionized global governance policy and decision-making regarding the environment, economics, and social justice.<sup>8</sup> The broad nature of the definition of sustainable development being that it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs,” allows institutions and organizations to tailor its meaning to best fit the intentions of the agencies intended agenda.<sup>9</sup> Earth Summits and the UNFCCC’s after the Bruntland Report have instilled sustainable development into their policy development discussions.<sup>10</sup> Although recent Conference of the Parties over the last two decades have claimed that economic growth, environmental protection, and social justice are of equal importance when developing international agreements to promote the best practices to balance the interest of the pillars, the practice by individual states is not set to the same standard. Between international organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations, the definition of sustainable development lacks a succinct and coherent definition.<sup>11</sup> This has lead to the inequitable consideration of the three pillars of sustainable development, resulting in inefficient policy agreements being reached at some of the older COP meetings previously. State foreign policy’s still place greater emphasis on global trade than even considering to attend a UNFCC Conference of the Parties. Economic

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<sup>7</sup> Carlos J.Castro, Sustainable Development: Mainstream and Critical Perspectives pg. 202

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals pg. 207

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pg. 208

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pg. 209

<sup>11</sup> Bob Jickling and Arjen E. Wals, Globalization and Environmental Education: Looking beyond Sustainable Development pg. 5

prosperity has remained the driving force of state policy decision making, which can be correlated to the disappointing achievement, or lack there of, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>12</sup> However, sustainable development remains the buzzword for all institutions, academics, and the public. Resulting in the continued usage of the term and the ideology in order to best manage the resource allocation to equally preserve the three pillars of sustainable development has created conformity surrounding sustainable development, which supports the persistent dependence on the ideology as the only potential solution to environmental issues.<sup>13</sup> From this it can be illustrated that the multiple perspectives of sustainable development and its core principles place economics at the forefront of importance beyond what is allocated to environmental protection and social justice.

### **Sustainable Development, the Unchallenged Discourse**

The discourse of sustainable development, despite being proven to have an uneven distribution of concern for economic growth over the other two pillars, remains the uncontested ideology to cope with the current environmental degradation and social injustices that plague the earth and its diverse societies. One of the reasons sustainable development remains uncontested is due to the commodification of public environmental goods that have become increasingly exclusive in nature, thus causing environmental insecurity. Initiatives such as the clean development mechanisms, carbon trading, and joint implementation plans have been introduced into the discussion domestically and internationally in an attempt to utilize market based incentives to secure the environment.<sup>14</sup> These market based corrections and investments allocate

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<sup>12</sup> David Hulme The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): A Short History of the World's Biggest Promise pg. 48

<sup>13</sup> Steven Bernstein, *Ideas, Social Structure and the Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism* pg. 467

<sup>14</sup> Ian Bailey, Andy Gouldson, and Peter Newell *Ecological Modernisation and the Governance of Carbon: A Critical Analysis* pg. 87

funding in different sectors of the economy to drive forward a bullish economy while trying to be more mindful of the impact it has on the environment and vulnerable societies. For example, carbon trading utilizes a credit system. Allowing states to trade their allocated carbon credit if they below the environmental impact baseline set by the UN, while states that are above this baseline are penalized and must purchase carbon credits from less consumptive states. These initiatives still place significant emphasis on economic growth and the profitability from the encouraged reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels and investments that cooperatively reduce a states ecological footprint driven by economics rather than the aspiration to protect the environment.

The Kuznets Curve highlights the relationship between income inequality and development, arguing that industrially developed states developing towards a post-industrial society will decrease their impact on the environment overtime since more capital can be allocated on secondary concerns of society.<sup>15</sup> This claim has gone unchallenged despite the fact that the world has yet to witness a post-industrial society, therefore lacking the empirical evidence that the Kuznets Curve is a practical theory that will result in populations with unchanged consumptive behaviour, yet improved environmental stewardship.<sup>16</sup> State policymakers have unfortunately continued with the mindset that the Kuznets Curve is justifiable and that the continuation of the status quo trade relations/ multilateral trade agreements, lifestyles, and economic growth trends is and acceptable approach to take while still leading to environmental protection over a longer period of time. This is extremely worrisome for many vulnerable states affected most by the impacts of climate change, demanding immediate changes

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<sup>15</sup> Susmita Dasgupta, Benoit Laplante, Hua Wang, and David Wheeler, *Confronting the Environmental Kuznets Curve* pg. 148

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 152



to current policy and ways of life in order to reduce the endangerment and damage to their society.<sup>17</sup>

This epistemic mindset has transferred into the views of many international organizations. The World Bank continues to finance projects that place emphasis on the development of a states economy first, while exploiting the comparative advantage of limited environmental and human rights regulations to increase market growth.<sup>18</sup> For example the World Bank currently utilizes large agricultural businesses like Bayer and Monsanto to provide food aid to countries in need, without fully assessing the long term implications that these countries will now be strong armed by these seed providers and ultimately relinquish a significant amount of their seed sovereignty, as seen in India, Ghana, and Nigeria.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the International Monetary Fund still places conditionality on a great deal of the loans created to finance developing state economic growth in an attempt to increase the developing state's independence. In practice many conditional loans from developed states or international aid agencies increase the pressure on developing states to leverage the weak environmental and social conditions of the state to satisfy the criteria necessary to receive financing to develop infrastructure and industry at the expense of the environment and societal wellbeing.<sup>20</sup>

Within the 30 years of that the UNFCCC's have taken place, minimal debate has been generated to critically question whether the sustainable development discourse is the most equitable resource allocation strategy for harmonizing the demands of the three pillars of

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<sup>17</sup> Justin Worland, What to Know About the Historic 'Paris Agreement' on Climate Change pg. 2

<sup>18</sup> Steven Bernstein, Liberal Environmentalism and Global Environmental Governance pg. 4

<sup>19</sup> Jack Kloppenburg, 2014, Re-purposing the Master's Tools: The Open Source Seed Initiative and the Struggle for Seed Sovereignty

<sup>20</sup> Steven Bernstein, Liberal Environmentalism and Global Environmental Governance pg. 6

sustainable development.<sup>21</sup> What we have seen in the many developments from international organizations is that collective action has been agreed upon as a central focus to rectify the serious and empirically supported crisis of global warming. Unfortunately, limited projects and goals negotiated in these organizations have come to fruition and continue to personify a ‘businesses as usual’ thought process that perpetuates the collective recognition and approval of sustainable development as the strategy needed to solve the globe’s universal tribulations. There have been significant measures taken to try to redistribute some of the resources allocated to each pillar, which has been demonstrated in the latest developments from the COP21 in Paris and the introduction of the new global initiative, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, these initiatives still operate within the sustainable development discourse and offer limited space for the consideration of alternative perspectives to safeguard the environment.

### **SDG’s and COP21 Perpetuate Sustainable Development**

Behind the most recent developments from the latest UNFCCC and SDGs, the newest UN formalized international initiatives, remains an embedded neoliberal agenda that has engrained the unwillingness to deviate from current economic operations for as long as possible. In the past it has been recognized that the MDGs lacked full completion and failed to produce significant policy measure taken by all states, and more importantly preparing states to try to counteract some of the most pressing global concerns, environmental degradation, poverty, famine, education, and sustainable development.<sup>22</sup> The MDGs have been argued to leave the most in-need populations and states behind, due to the ambitious “setting broad global goals [that] inadvertently encouraged nations to measure progress through national averages. In the

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<sup>21</sup> Rafael Leal-Arcas and Luigi Carafa, Road to Paris COP21: Towards Soft Global Governance for Climate Change? Pg. 132

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals pg. 210

rush to make that progress, many focused on the easiest-to-reach children and communities, not those in greatest need.”<sup>23</sup> This is the initial position that developed states and those adhering to the MDGs took that demonstrated the enduring motivation to fund and develop the easiest targets that will generate positive results to come closer to achieving the intended goals. This can then be indicative of the potential positions that states will take when trying to tackle the SDGs that were recently released early this year. The SDGs similar to the preceding MDGs face the challenges of accurately “determining roles of central government and subnational authorities, lack of powers, resources and capacities of all stakeholders, corruption in public sector, lack of open government performance” and the most hypersensitive issue of all, financing the goal achievement in an appropriate manor by each country involved.<sup>24</sup> Although the SDGs effectively distinguish the different capabilities of developed and developing states, it is vital to recognize the mounting importance that developed states have in funding the seventeen broad sweeping and highly ambitious goals.<sup>25</sup> It simply reduces down to the mentality societies of developed and developing states have to transition from the current Bretton Woods developmental path to a distinguished way of life that challenges the status quo form of development the globe is currently experiencing. It can be argued that since the new SDG goals are so ambitious and demand such a “transformational vision for our common future till 2030” that developed states society and governments will be reluctant to change unless equal measures are taken by other states, and unfortunately the most developed states show limited cooperative effort, especially if the initiatives jeopardize economic prosperity.<sup>26</sup> If this principle goes unmet than states can justify that the current development patterns and ways of life should remain intact

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<sup>23</sup> Fred K. Nkusi, SDGs Are Designed to Leave No One behind pg. 1

<sup>24</sup> Fred K. Nkusi, SDGs Are Designed to Leave No One behind pg. 3

<sup>25</sup> United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform 2015

<sup>26</sup> Fred K. Nkusi, SDGs Are Designed to Leave No One behind pg. 3

and secure. The same habits and development patterns that perpetuate the support for prioritizing economic growth and development before that of other important global issues. In addition the buzzword of sustainable development remains significant within the wording of the SDGs highlighting that the new goals operating within the existing discourse and offer rhetoric and that challenges the allocation of resources towards the three pillars of sustainable development. The SDGs attempt to redefine and reiterate the importance of environmental preservation and social equality with the regard for economic growth being one of the seventeen goals in question.

A similar fate presents itself when unraveling the developments made during the COP21 in Paris and the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement (APA).<sup>27</sup> The landmark agreement that came from the most recent conference of the parties ended in a partially binding agreement to reduce the increase in long-term global temperature by less than two degrees Celsius.<sup>28</sup> The agreement also encapsulates the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities in an attempt to allow each country in participation, whether developed or developing, to enact policy to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions due to fossil fuels to help reach the universal goal.<sup>29</sup> The issue with this agreement is that the emission target for each country is not binding, meaning that the state can dictate its own ambition to combat climate change.<sup>30</sup> Meaning that so long as economic development and current societal ways of life remain more important in legislative policymakers minds, the redistribution of importance to ecological protection will remain limited. This situation will likely present itself in the United States and other countries that value their current economic

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<sup>27</sup> Eliza Northrop, After COP21: 7 Key Tasks to Implement the Paris Agreement

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Rafael Leal-Arcas and Luigi Carafa, Road to Paris COP21: Towards Soft Global Governance for Climate Change? Pg. 135

<sup>30</sup> Justin Worland, What to Know About the Historic 'Paris Agreement' on Climate Change pg. 4

growth trends more than the environments protection. In addition, another pressing development of the agreement that highlights the continued sustainable development discourse is that trillions of dollars' worth of funding will need to be allocated to developing alternative energy sources to fossil fuels. This will relocate financing from the most profitable economic industries to other forms of energy, whilst continuing to place the global market at the center of all of these developments.<sup>31</sup> The APA also proves that the sustainable development discourse continues as the epistemic knowledge used to try to equalize the importance and need to develop the three pillars of sustainable development.

Their remains overlooked areas of concern that can cause future environmental degradation that the SDGs and APA have inadequately covered. Greenhouse gas emissions caused from livestock and the current commodification of consumer products in developed states have caused a dependence on the current economic industrial portfolio that will be incredibly difficult to alter unless it is addressed through international initiatives similar to the SDGs and the APA.<sup>32</sup> If these types of consumer behaviour and state economic planning remain unaltered, both consumers and states will continue their current industrialized societal ways of life in developed countries, while ecological stewardship and social justice persist on the backburner. Furthermore, more consideration needs to be placed on developing countries' core industries being developed in order to better balance the three pillars of sustainable development like the SDGs and APA have began to do. Since the Sustainable development discourse remains the unchallenged episteme to consolidate global economic, social, and environmental issues it should be refined by considering alternatives to help balance the allocation of resources amongst

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen Bernstein, *Ideas, Social Structure and the Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism* pg. 485

<sup>32</sup> Eliza Northrop, *After COP21: 7 Key Tasks to Implement the Paris Agreement*

the three pillars so that economic growth does not remain the priority amongst states and consumers alike.

### **Consolidating Alternatives**

Many scholars have proposed alternatives to sustainable development, but they have gone unrecognized in international organizations and policy decision-making because of the dominance of the sustainable development discourse. Scholars like Francois Schneider, Giorgos Kallis, and Joan Martinez-Alier have introduced degrowth theory, which counters the current discourse that global governance institutions have used to tackle the issues of environmental sustainability and social equity.<sup>33</sup> The current neoliberal founded international organizations have maintained the stance that threat sustainable development will create a positive sum benefit for the three pillars, when they have continued to show an inverse relationship in the past. Meaning that economic growth has been linked to environmental social injustices in many cases, especially in developing states. Sustainable degrowth is a theory that suggests gradually downsizing economies production and consumption to enhance ecological sustainability at a local and a global level that is carried out both in the short-term and long-term time frames.<sup>34</sup> Degrowth is not a theory that continues indefinitely, since that would mean the end result is no marketplace at all, instead degrowth suggests downsizing economies to a point of prolonged sustainability. “The paradigmatic proposition of degrowth is therefore that human progress without economic growth is possible.”<sup>35</sup> However, the sustainable development discourse

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<sup>33</sup>François Schneider, Giorgos Kallis, and Joan Martinez-Alier, Crisis or Opportunity? Economic Degrowth for Social Equity and Ecological Sustainability pg. 512

<sup>34</sup> Raoul Weiler, De-Growth for Earth Survival: Economic De-Growth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity Paris: April 2008 pg. 144

<sup>35</sup> François Schneider, Giorgos Kallis, and Joan Martinez-Alier, Crisis or Opportunity? Economic Degrowth for Social Equity and Ecological Sustainability pg. 513

remains unrivaled by alternative views to protect the environment because sustainable development appeases the neoliberal organizations and states that stress the continuation of economic growth before other developments. Thus, delegitimizing the stance taken by sustainable degrowth scholars. Additionally, policy makers can turn to indigenous self-governance and spiritual practices in the adoption of Buen Vivir in Latin America and many other minute indigenous groups globally.<sup>36</sup> Buen Vivir is viewed as a reaction to the injustices of globalization and sustainable development and opportunity to build a different society sustained in the coexistence of human beings in their diversity and in harmony with nature, based on recognition of the diverse cultural values existing in each country and worldwide.<sup>37</sup> These indigenous ways of life have scalable objectives that can be applied will globally, but since such a minute population practices such a way of life it does not penetrate the international organizations that negotiate policy agreements on balancing the three pillars.

Incorporating discussion that exercises alternatives to sustainable development like sustainable degrowth or indigenous groups ways of life might promote goals for development that are more specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time sensitive than those proposed in the SDGs and future COP negotiations. Helping to fill the gaps that the SDGs and the APA have not touched on while also placing a check on the sustainable development discourse as it continually applied. The synergy created from dialogue between multiple views with the objective of preventing excessive environmental degradation could create more results driven goals similar to the MDGs that could help to place pressure on states promptness to change their current consumptive behaviour to increase the appreciation of the relationship between the three

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<sup>36</sup> Julien Vanhulst, and Adrian E. Beling, *Buen Vivir: Emergent Discourse within or beyond Sustainable Development?* Pg. 55

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 56

pillars and how intimately connected they are.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, state governments and the UN international organizations have only acknowledged sustainable development as the saving grace to solve the universal hardships each state faces in different ways.

### **Closing Remarks**

Sustainable development has been proven to remain the uncontested discourse used to cope with the difficulties of environmental degradation and social injustices. The initiatives from the recently developed SDGs and COP21 in Paris Agreement signify the continued permanence of sustainable development, with a noticeable push to place greater emphasis on the environmental protection and social wellbeing pillars that constitute sustainable development policy decision-making. Both of these recent developments in the international community have yet to withstand the test of time to determine if they have effectively balanced the demands of each pillar of sustainable development. Since the long-term orientation of developments like the SDGs and the APA have not yet failed or succeeded, it can be argued that it is unnecessary to investigate the merit of alternative knowledge discourses to effectively care for environment and society. However, the future consultation and opening of dialogue with alternatives views other than sustainable development can instill valuable discussion and improve the equal significance of the three pillars of the unrivaled sustainable development discourse. For the time being sustainable development will remain the dominant epistemic knowledge that will continue to maintain liberal economic order as well as lead national and international policy making to a greener, socially just, and economically prosperous future worldwide.

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<sup>38</sup> David Hulme, *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): A Short History of the World's Biggest Promise* pg. 47



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