

Unit 4

Sustainable Development

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Learning Objectives

This unit aims to discuss:

- historical context of the emergence of the concept of sustainable development;
- genesis, evolution and expansion of this concept;
- sustainable development as our common future;
- vagueness and political concept of sustainable development; and
- future of sustainable development in the context of globalisation.

4.1 Introduction

In this Block, after the studying units 1, 2 and 3, we have already learnt some of the important concepts related to the process of development. By now, we are familiar with concepts such as progress, change, modernisation, development, social development, human development and gender development. We have seen that the concept of development is constantly being critically reviewed, and as a result our conception of development has been undergoing changes.

In the last four decades, there is a growing awareness and activism relating to worsening environmental situation at the local, national and global levels. The emerging environmental concerns have once again led to the reconsideration of our conception, goals and strategies of development. As a result of this, our conception of development has experienced a paradigm-shift and this has its expression in the concept of sustainable development, which emerged in the 1980s and continues to dominate the development-discourse at various levels. This unit deals with this concept.

An attempt to trace the roots of the concept of sustainable development in the historical context, which gave rise to the development-environment debate, is made in the first section of this unit. The second section attempts to locate the genesis and traces the evolution of this concept through some of the prominent international events/documents. The third section is devoted to elaborating the concept of sustainable development in terms of its definition, meaning, requirements, policy objectives and strategic measures as conceived in the Brundtland Commission's report "*Our Common Future*" (1987). In the final sections, we will make an attempt to understand the criticisms of the concept of sustainable development as well as the future of sustainable development in this globalisation era.

4.2 Sustainable Development: Historical Context

The early roots of the concept of sustainable development can be traced back to the development-environment debate. The economic growth model of development, its adoption by most of the countries in the world and realisation of the consequences it produced in various forms of environmental degradation has provided the historical context for the rise of the development-environment debate.

The economic growth model of development is characterised by the use of modern technology, the factory system of production and rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. The Western countries initially followed this model of development and prescribed it for the less developed ones. The predominant underlying belief was that the underdeveloped countries would eventually catch up with the industrialised countries, provided they emulate the economic and social systems of the West. The less developed countries adopted the western model of development rather uncritically.

The consequences of adoption of the western model of development by the less developed countries were not all positive. Economic growth occurred, but it was accompanied by a widened gulf between the countries in the North and the South, and it also helped to promote economic disparities between the rich and the poor sections within particular societies. It was realised that "development" conceived simply as "economic growth" was an inadequate notion, and that economic growth does not necessarily lead to the development of the lower strata of society. This realisation caused a shift in development thinking and eventually led to the inclusion of some additional criteria of development such as distributive justice or equity, and improvement in the overall quality of life of the masses (Dhanagare 1996: 7-9).

Moreover, it is more important to note that the examination of the impact of the western model of development on the quality of the global environment has led to the critical reconsideration of this model of development. It is realised that the reckless pursuit of industrialisation and the use of resource exploitative modern technology for development have resulted in environmental deterioration to such an extent that the very existence of all the living species is endangered. There is a general agreement that the economic expansion, especially during the post-war period, has had alarming consequences for the global environment (Munshi 2000: 253). Industrialisation required a continuous supply of energy and materials from nature. It led to the constant accumulation of wastes that resulted from accelerated industrial production and increasing level of consumption. There was a gradual deterioration of nature. The "modern, industrial form of production induced increasingly severe degrees of social inequality and growing environmental instability and degradation... which, together, have more recently been conceptualised as the "crisis of modernity" (Eduardo and Woodgate 1997: 85). The environmental degradation that has occurred is marked by a large-scale extraction of finite natural resources. Loss of forests, extinction of animal and plant species, depletion of the ozone layer, air, water and soil pollution, loss of marine life and bio-diversity etc. have occurred at an alarming rate and have posed a serious threat to the very survival of life on this planet.

While examining the consequences of the Western model of development in the context of ecosystems and economies of developing nations, Sunita Narain (2002: 13) comments that, the "western economic and technological model is highly material and energy intensive, it metabolises huge quantities of natural resources and leaves a trail of toxins, with highly degraded and transformed ecosystems in its wake. It is this model that developing nations are also following for economic and social growth, leading to an extraordinary cocktail of poverty and inequality side by side with growing economies, pollution and

large-scale ecological destruction". It is recognised that the "western development model in its most triumphant moments appears to be neither desirable nor universally applicable because it is simply not sustainable" (Bernhard 1997: 113). Thus, the two basic assumptions of the Western model of development, i.e. "first, development could be universalised in space and, second, that it would be durable in time" (Sachs 1997: 71), had lost their validity.

Due to the strategies adopted for economic growth, environmental degradation and exploitation of natural resources have become global phenomena. Eventually, the increasing awareness of environmental problems has led to the emergence of environmentalism. It is important to note that environmentalism has added an important dimension to the ongoing development discourse. In fact, it has caused a paradigm-shift in our vision of development. It has compelled the intellectuals concerned to think about what is being done to the ecosystem of this planet in the name of development. The worsening environmental situation has led to the re-examination and re-consideration of the policies, strategies and programmes for development. As a result, the environment - development debate emerged and became intensified in due course of time.

Initially, Development and Environment were seen as distinct entities. There was a sharp division between those who supported development over environment and those who argued for environment over development (Baviskar 1997: 196). As another scholar observes, there emerged two different camps of protagonists who inhabited two different mental spaces and regarded themselves as opponents (Ibid: 71-72). This gave rise to the dichotomy of development versus environment.

However, eventually, there also emerged an increased awareness about the fact that human beings need both "development" and "environment". As Balletmus has expressed, there was "a growing recognition that the overall goals of environment and development are not in conflict but are indeed the same, namely, the improvement of human quality of life or welfare of the present and future generations (cf Mohanty 1998:82)". Such thinking led to the view that "development" versus "environment" is a false dichotomy. This view is well articulated in *World Development Report 1992 – Development and the Environment*. It is argued in this report that the, "economic development and sound environmental management are complementary aspects of the same agenda. Without adequate environmental protection, development will be undermined; without development, environmental protection will fail...income growth will provide the resources for improved environmental management" (World Bank 1992: 25). In fact, such a view underscored the need of reconciliation between "development" and "environment". The concept of "sustainable development", as defined in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), titled "*Our Common Future*" (1987), represents such an attempt to reconcile the goals of development as well as that of environmental protection. Before we study the definition and meaning of this concept, let us look at its genesis and evolution.

Reflection and Action 4.1

What do you mean by sustainable development ? How is it relevant in present day context?

4.3 Sustainable Development: Genesis and Evolution

According to Eduardo Sevilla-Guzman and Graham Woodgate (1997: 86-87), the concept of "sustainable development" was the result of a dynamic gestation. Hence, they have attempted to trace its genesis in "official international discourse". They have reviewed various international events and publications

and schematically brought out their discovery/product and character (See Box 4.1). Adopting a similar approach, a brief review of the major international events/ documents and their contribution to the making of the concept of “sustainable development” is outlined here.

In 1972, the United Nations Conference on “Human Environment”, took place in Stockholm, Sweden. The Stockholm Conference was historical in the sense that environmental problems received a formal recognition for the first time at the global level. The modern industrial societies could realise that there is only “one world”. It was also recognised that environmental problems are global problems requiring international solutions, although the developed countries of the North and the developing countries of the South do not necessarily share the same environmental concerns.

A report titled *Limits to Growth* - the work of the Club of Rome (1972-74), has been credited as the first official study on global environmental deterioration. In this report, there is ecological analysis of industrialism. The report also focused on the predicted results of continuing levels of resource depletion, pollution and population growth. Due to this report, a sense of realisation grew that infinite growth was impossible with finite resources. Then, a diagnosis of the factors of global environmental deterioration brought out in a report titled *Global 2000* – commissioned by the U. S. President, Jimmy Carter and published in 1980 – underscored that northern lifestyles cannot be reproduced globally.

Then, in the year 1981, the concept of “sustainable development” appeared for the first time. It was enshrined in the title of a key document - *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development*, published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP). According to the *Strategy's* definition, “for development to be sustainable it must take account of social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and non-living resource base; and of the long term as well as the short term advantages and disadvantages of alternative actions” (Starke 1990: 8-9).

In 1983, the United Nations set up the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway, as an independent body. Its objective was to re-examine the critical environment and development problems on the planet and to formulate realistic proposals to solve them, and to ensure that human progress will be sustained through development without bankrupting the resources of the future generations. The WCED published its report titled “*Our Common Future*” in the year 1987. This report presented the first official definition of the concept of “sustainable development”. The contribution of “*Our Common Future*” (1987), is threefold: i) it offers the first official definition of sustainable development, ii) it suggests, for the first time, an international strategy for confronting the crisis of modernity, and iii) it brings about a paradigm change in conventional thinking regarding the notion of “development”.

Another document, “*Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living*” (published by IUCN, UNEP and WWF, in 1991), has suggested a revised global strategy for the conservation of nature. More importantly, it was recognised by this work that global nature conservation requires the participation of local people.

In 1992, representatives of over 150 countries met in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as the “Earth Summit”. The Earth Summit established important linkages between environment and development and contributed to the further

development of the concept of "sustainable development". It produced the "*The Earth Charter*" - a code of conduct or plan of action for the 21st century i.e. Agenda 21, and Local Agenda 21 (LA21), an interpretation for local issues (which came later); the Climate Convention – a convention to control climate change due to atmospheric pollution, and the Bio-diversity Convention – a convention to promote the conservation of bio-diversity. The Rio Declaration also set out the framework of principles of conservation and use of forests and, established important steps that needed to ensure an environmentally stable and sustainable planet (*The Hindu Survey of the Environment* 2002: 5-6).

Correspondingly, at the international level, many nation-states have been trying to go ahead with the notion of "sustainable development". They are striving to find out economic and political solutions for environmental problems. One also notices periodical attempts to take stock of the progress made by the nations in the direction of "sustainable development". For instance, in 1997, "Rio+5" meet was held in New York in order to assess the progress towards "sustainable development". Again, as a further step, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was held at Johannesburg, from 26th August to 4th September 2002. The Johannesburg Summit is recognised as "Rio+10". The agenda for this international meet was much beyond the review of the progress made in the direction of sustainable development in the 10 years since Rio. The agenda included every possible issue related to environment and development: energy, water and sanitation, health, forests, consumption patterns, poverty, trade, globalisation etc. Thus, the scope of "sustainable development" was broadened.

Sustainable development was seen as comprising three components: economic development, social development and environmental protection (Reddy 2002: 10). The newspaper reports which appeared during the Summit period highlighted that, there were discussions and debates over many issues which include: call for reduction of poverty, saving the planet's fast-dwindling resources from further plundering, criticism against the European and American pattern of agricultural subsidies and a need to eliminate the trade distorting subsidies, dispute on the definition of globalisation and demands by the Third World countries for more aid, finance and fairer trade.

Thus, various international events and publications have contributed to the making of the concept of "sustainable development". Let us now understand the definition and meaning of the concept of "sustainable development" as formulated and elaborated in "*Our Common Future*" (1987).

Reflection and Action 4.2

Is sustainable development a social movement? What are the historical genesis of this movement?

4.4 Concept of Sustainable Development as Defined in *Our Common Future* (1987)

The definition of the term sustainable development, its meaning, requirements, policy objectives, and suitable strategy, as mentioned in the report *Our Common Future*, have been briefly dealt with below. (The text inserted within quotes is adapted from the chapter from the Commission's report, *Our Common Future* (1987), reproduced under the title Towards Sustainable Development in *Science Age*, August 1987: 30-38).

a) Sustainable Development: Definition and Meaning of the Concept

The definition of the concept of Sustainable Development put forward in the report titled *Our Common Future* (1987) is:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of “needs”, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs” (cf *Science Age* 1987: 30).

In order to understand the meaning of the definition, let us understand the core issues addressed in the above definition. First is the issue of economic growth. The economic growth is not only considered essential for poverty reduction but also for meeting human needs and aspirations for better life. Second is the issue of limitations of the environment’s ability to meet the needs of the present and future generations. Due to the pressures generated by growing societal needs, societies are using modern technologies for extracting and utilising natural resources, which are limited. If we continue to exploit existing limited natural resources, future generations will not be able to meet their own needs. Thus, environment’s ability to meet present and future generations’ needs has certain limits. This realisation is clearly reflected in the definition. Thus, the concept of “sustainable development” is based on an integrated view of development and environment; it recommends pursuance of development strategies in order to maximise economic growth from a given ecological milieu on the one hand, and to minimise the risks and hazards to the environment on the other; for being able to meet the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability to meet those of the future generations.

In short, the above definition of “sustainable development” implies that: (i) we should direct our efforts towards redressing the damage already done to the environment by earlier unsustainable patterns of economic growth and, (ii) we should follow such a pattern of development which avoids further damage to the planet’s ecosystem and ensures meeting of the needs of present as well as future human generations.

b) “Sustainable Development”: Requirements

While elaborating the concept, the report *Our Common Future (1987)* also brings out the requirements of “sustainable development”. For a better understanding of the concept, some of the important requirements of “sustainable development” can be highlighted:

Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life..... the promotion of values that encourage consumption standards that are within the bounds of the ecologically possible and to which all can reasonably aspire.....that societies meet human needs both by increasing productive potential and by ensuring equitable opportunities for all..... demographic developments are in harmony with the changing productive potential of the ecosystem.....At a minimum, ...development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings.....the world must ensure equitable access to the constrained resource and reorient technological efforts to relieve the pressure.....that the rate of depletion of non-renewable resources should foreclose as few future options as possible.....the conservation of plant and animal species..... that the adverse impacts on the quality of air, water, and other natural elements are minimized so as to sustain the ecosystem’s overall integrity” (cf *Science Age* 1987: 30-31).

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It is also added that, in essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations” (cf *Science Age* 1987: 31).

Box 4.1: Genesis of the Concept of Sustainable Development in Official International Discourse		
Event	Discovery/product	Character
The Stockholm Conference(1972)	Modern, industrial societies realize that there is only 'one world'	A first official recognition of environmental deterioration
The work of the Club of Rome (1972-74): 'Limits to Growth'	Realisation of the impossibility of infinite growth with finite resources	The first official studies of global environmental deterioration
'Global 2000' commissioned by President Carter, published in 1980, ignored by President Regan	Realisation that northern lifestyles cannot be reproduced globally	A first diagnosis of the causes of global environmental deterioration
'World Conservation Strategy' (WCS) published by IUCN/UNEP/WWF (1981)	Nature conservation can be achieved regardless of human welfare in the vicinity	First global strategy for nature conservation and introduction of concept of 'sustainable development'
World Commission on Environment and Development publishes 'Our Common Future' (1987)	First official definition of the concept of 'sustainable development'	The first suggestion of an international strategy for confronting the crisis of modernity
Second WCS, 'Caring for the Earth: A strategy for sustainable living', IUCN/UNEP/WWF (1991)	Global nature conservation requires the participation of local people	Revised global strategy for nature conservation
United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: The Earth Summit (1992).	The Earth Charter (Agenda 21)	A code of human conduct for the twenty-first century
	The Climate Convention	A convention to control climate change due to atmospheric pollution
	The Biodiversity Convention	A convention to promote the conservation of biodiversity

c) Sustainable Development: Policy Objectives

The report, *Our Common Future (1987)* also recommends that in order to move on the path of sustainable development, all nations are required to bring about certain policy changes. It has been noted that the “critical objectives for environment and development policies that follow from the concept of sustainable development include: (i) reviving growth; (ii) changing the quality of growth; (iii) meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water, and sanitation; (iv) ensuring a sustainable level of population; (v) conserving and enhancing the resource base; (vi) reorienting technology and managing the risk; and (vii) merging environment and economics in decision making” (Ibid: 32).

d) Sustainable Development: Suitable Strategy

Regarding suitable strategy, the report, *Our Common Future (1987)*, notes in its broadest sense that the strategy for sustainable development aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature. In the specific context of the development and environmentthe pursuit of

sustainable development requires: (i) a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making, (ii) an economic system that is able to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a self-reliant and sustained basis, (iii) a social system that provides for solutions to the tensions arising from disharmonious development, (iv) a production system that respects the obligation to preserve the ecological base for development, (v) a technological system that can search continuously for new solutions, (vi) an international system that fosters sustainable patterns of trade and finance, and (vii) an administrative system that is flexible and has the capacity for self-correction. These requirements are more in the nature of goals that should underlie national and international action on development" (Ibid: 38). Let us now turn our attention towards critique of the concept of sustainable development.

Reflection and Action 4.3

Select a development project known to you. Explain the reason why this project is or is not sustainable.

4.5 Criticisms of the Concept of Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Commission, has been subjected to critical scrutiny by many scholars. The criticisms not only point out the logical contradictions and semantic ambivalence in the term, but also center on its vagueness/ambiguity of the terms/phrases included in the definition, point towards difficulties at the operational level and attempt to uncover implicit assumptions and political motives.

a) Sustainable Development: Logical Contradiction and Semantic Ambivalence

Scholars like Ramesh Deewan, take an extreme stand and express the view that the concept of sustainable development represents contradiction in the term itself. He remarks that, development and sustainability are not only incompatible with each other, they are contradictory as well. In other words, sustainable is not development (cf Dhanagare 1996: 10). Such a view clearly implies that, the term development used in any sense – say economic growth or growth with equity or improvement in quality of life or modernisation – inevitably leads to an increase in the level of consumption and also to the exploitation of natural resources.

According to Wolfgang Sachs, the linkage of the term sustainable to development has created a terrain of semantic ambivalence. In his words, within the new concept, the locus of sustainability has subtly shifted from nature to development; while sustainable previously referred to natural yields, it now refers to development. And the perceptual frame also changes, instead of nature, development becomes the object of concern and, instead of development, nature becomes the critical factor to be watched. In short, the meaning of sustainability slides from conservation of nature to conservation of development" (Sachs 1997: 73).

b) Definition of Sustainable Development: Vague and Ambiguous

In the opinion of Sukhamoy Chakravorty, the phrase sustainable development ...says nothing precise and, therefore, means anything to anybody (cf Agarwal 1992: 51). Anil Agarwal adds: for a logging company it can mean sustained projects; for an environmental economist it can mean sustained stocks of natural forests; for a social ecologist it can mean sustained use of forest; and, for an environmentalist it can mean a clean heritage for our children. But surely confusion cannot be more productive than clarity" (Ibid: 52).

The observations of William F. Fisher show persons with different view points, holding different philosophical positions, having different goals in mind and

advocating different means to achieve desired ends use the same moral vocabulary of social justice and the same economic rhetoric of sustainable development. In his view, sustainable development has become a term that is used to justify whatever one does and, by implication, criticize those with differing goals, strategies, and opinions (1997: 9). Widely debated Sardar Sarovar Project in India is the case in point. Fisher writes, dam proponents and opponents seem sincere in their commitment to goals of sustainable development and social justice, but what they mean by these terms differs (ibid: 8). (For further illustration of this point see Box 4.2).

Box 4.2: Is Sardar Sarovar Project an Example of Sustainable Development?

William F. Fisher's observations are quite illustrative in this context. He writes, "The proponents of the Sardar Sarovar Dam insist that sustainable development is compatible with large scale, ambitious, centrally controlled schemes, which are capable of mitigating the effects of natural catastrophes and meeting the increasing needs of a growing economy for food water and energy.From their perspective, the Narmada runoff is a perennially renewed resource that currently goes to waste. Dam advocates argue that domesticating this untapped resource would enable Gujarat to "sustain" its economic growth and the standard of living of its population. Project planners and supporters argue that the readily apparent and increasing needs for water in drought-prone areas, for both agricultural growth and a growing economy, justify the projected means and the costs of damming the Narmada and relocating those currently residing in the submergence area of the reservoir."

On the other hand, "critics of the Sardar Sarovar Projectquestion the portrayal of Sardar Sarovar as an example of sustainable development and see it instead as another project that will overexploit the available resources to the detriment of the poor and the benefit of the rich. They argue that by any measure the project is unsustainable and unjust.They note that the size and comprehensiveness of schemes like Sardar Sarovar require that these schemes be initiated, financed and managed by the state as the guardian of the interests of the people. For these critics, sustainable development is not top-down but bottom-up. It requires that development efforts be decentralised and requires the involvement of local people at all levels of the design, appraisal, and implementation of projects.for them sustainable development should be as concerned with justice and equity as it is with an ecologically sustainable use of resources. From the perspective advocated by these critics, large scale, centrally controlled schemes are incompatible with sustainable development..."

(Source: Fisher 1997)

Not only does the term sustainable development mean different things to different persons or groups; its meaning also differs for one set of nations from that of the other. As Sevilla-Guzman Edurado and Graham Woodgate (1997: 86) have brought out, the official discourse as represented in the Brundtland Committee report, *Our Common Future...* seems to differentiate between the meaning of sustainable development as it applies to industrial nations and its implications for countries whose economies are relatively less industrialised. For the latter,first, it means the realisation of the potential for economic growth .. second, it promotes generalised increases in levels of consumption.....For highly industrialised nations,sustainable development allows for the continued realisation of a nation's growth potential, so long as it is not achieved at the expense of others. Such growth will continue to be industrial in nature as, according to the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), industrial production is of "fundamental importance to the economies of the modern societies and an indispensable motor of growth".

C. R. Reddy also views the Commission's definition as "simple but vague" (2002: 10). In the words of Wolfgang Sachs (1997: 74-75),

upon closer inspection, one notes that the definition given by the Brundtland Commission does not refer to 'the greatest number', but focuses instead on the 'needs of the present' and those of the 'future generations'. While the crisis of the nature has been constitutive of the concept of 'sustainable development', the crisis of justice finds only a faint echo in the notions of 'development' and 'needs'. In the definition, the attention to the dimension of time is not counterbalanced by an equal attention to the dimension of space. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that the canonical definition has resolved the dilemma of nature versus justice in favour of nature. But two crucial questions remain unanswered: 'What needs?' and 'Whose needs?' Is sustainable development supposed to meet the needs for water, land and economic security or the needs for air travel and bank deposits? Is it concerned with survival needs or with luxury needs? Are the needs in question are those of the global consumer class or those of the enormous numbers of have-nots? That the Brundtland report remained ambiguous throughout, largely side-stepping the crisis of justice, has not been without consequences in the years that have followed.

V. Ratna Reddy (1995: A-23), referring to the concern for meeting the needs of future generations expressed in the Commission's definition says, " at the conceptual level it is difficult to circumvent the conflicts between the present and future generations' interests. While needs are conceived differently from one environment and culture to another in the same generation, how future generations will conceive of their needs may well be beyond our imagination...".

c) Critique Relating to the Operational Substance of the Definition

While raising doubts regarding the operational substance of the definition, Anil Agarwal (1992: 50-51), asks.

who is going to ensure the rights of future generations when, given the highly divided world we live in, a large proportion of even the present generation cannot meet all its needs. Given such a social and political context, the.....definitions also fail to say whose future generations' needs are being sought to be protected and preserved. Are we talking only of the future generations of the rich or also of the poor?.

Again, C. R. (2002: 10) Reddy comments that, "while an entire U.N. machinery has been created around 'sustainable development', the world is still waiting for an operational meaning of what is an intuitively appealing but yet fuzzy concept".

In a similar vein, William F. Fisher (1997: 8) observes that, "while widespread commitment to the term 'sustainable development' might suggest a growing worldwide consensus on the need for development that is sustainable, there is no agreement about the specific goals of sustainable development or the appropriate means to achieve them.' About the Brundtland Commission's definition of the term, he further observes that,

itdefines an arena of intense debate, not an arena of consensus.... Used in so many varying ways, 'sustainable development' has broad appeal, but can not help direct a set of actions toward specific goals, nor can it offer any guidelines about how trade-offs are to be balanced among these goals. Instead, the term obscures, rather than clarifies, the central issue of balancing the need for income redistribution and economic growth with resource limits and population growth" (Ibid).

d) Critique Relating to "Politics of Sustainable Development"

K. R. Nayar (1994: 1327) looks at the concept of "sustainable development" as a political instrument and is critical of many aspects of the Commission's definition. He argues that, "the concept of sustainable development has emerged from those countries which themselves practice unsustainable resource

use" (Ibid: 1327), and further adds that "the politics of 'sustainable development' is that at present it is anti-south, anti-poor, and thereby anti-ecological" (Ibid: 1328-29).

Nayar also comments that, "the need" with reference to sustainable development is affluence rather than basic, or opulence rather than squalor. Because, when basic needs become an integral component of a developmental model, the question of unsustainability does not arise". He further adds, "the cyclical relationship between poverty and environmental degradation is conceptualised in simplistic terms". The assumption is that,

as poverty increases, natural environments are degraded and when environments degrade, the prospects for further livelihood decrease, environmental degradation generates more poverty, thus accelerating the cycle. While the basic factors which generate poverty are kept outside this framework, it also does not consider the role of lopsided development which degrades the 'natural' capital, and the issue of artificially inflated impact of the poor on an already lower quality of 'natural capital' set in motion by factors other than poverty" (Ibid: 1327-28).

While uncovering the implicit political motive behind the Western concern for curtailment of population growth in the developing countries for sustainable development, Nayar expresses the view that, "sustainable development is visualised as a solution to make available raw materials on a continuous basis so that the production system, the expanding market and the political system are not threatened. The raw materials in the developing countries, therefore, need to be protected and their population growth curtailed so that resources would remain easily available." Again, in his opinion, "The Not-in-My-Back-Yard or Nimby syndrome is mainly responsible for ecologically unsustainable development projects including hazardous industries shifting out of these countries to developing countries. When the aim is to suggest patchwork solutions to the unsustainable production system of the north, population growth in the south automatically becomes the target of the debate on sustainable development" (Ibid: 1328).

Reflection and Action 4.3

What are the major vaguenesses inbuilt in the concept of sustainable development. In your opinion how can these vaguenesses be removed?

4.6 Globalisation and Future of Sustainable Development

Globalisation has created new challenges in the march towards what is implied in the notion of sustainable development. Martin Khor comments that, "the process of Globalisation linked to liberalisation has gained so much force that it has undermined, and is undermining, the sustainable development agenda. Commerce and the perceived need to remain competitive in a global market, and to pamper and cater to the demands of companies and the rich have become the top priority of governments in the North and some in the South. The environment, welfare of the poor, global partnership have all been dislodged and sacrificed in this wave of free market mania" (Khor 2000: 39). The process of globalisation is seen as an important reason for the failure of the Johannesburg Summit. In its editorial, *The Hindu* remarks that "an important reason for the Johannesburg fiasco is that the global willingness to collectively deal with the problems of the environment gradually evaporated during the past decade of accelerated globalisation" (*The Hindu* 2002: 10).

The above remarks help us to critically look at the concept of sustainable development and to understand the complexities and intricacies involved in establishing liaison between the crisis of nature and crisis of justice. Given

the context of differential level of socio-economic development, cultural specificities, political positions of various nation-states in the North and the South, and challenges created by the forces of globalisation, the above criticisms also underline the practical difficulties in operationalising the concept in space and time. Yet, the concept of “sustainable development” can be seen to dominate the development-discourse and continues to enlarge a debate across the national frontiers.

4.7 Conclusion

In this unit we have tried to critically understand the concept of “sustainable development”. In the first section, we have noted that, the alarming degradation of the environment – spawned by the western economic growth model of development characterised by the use of modern technology, rapid industrialisation and urbanisation – provided the historical context that gave rise to the dichotomy of “development” versus “environment”. Eventually, the growing realisation that human beings need both “development” and “environment” resulted in reconciliation between “development” and “environment”, which finds its expression in the concept of “sustainable development”.

In the second section, we have traced the genesis and evolution of the concept, through a brief review of some of the prominent international events and documents – such as the Stockholm Conference (1972), *Limits to Growth* – the work of the Club of Rome (1972- 74), *Global 2000* (1980) *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development* (1981), the report of the WCED *Our Common Future* (1987), “Rio+5” held in New York (1997) and WSSD held at Johannesburg (2002) – and brought out their contribution to the making of the concept of “sustainable development”.

The third section was devoted to elaborate the concept of sustainable development in terms of its definition, meaning, requirements, policy objectives and strategic measures as conceived, defined and elaborated in the report *Our Common Future* (1987).

In the fourth section, we have noted that the concept of “sustainable development” has been criticised on various grounds such as: “logical contradictions” involved in the phrase and “semantic ambivalence”, its “vagueness and ambiguity”, doubts expressed with regard to its “operational substance” and “political motives”. The process of globalisation linked to liberalisation is viewed as detrimental to the realisation of sustainable development agenda in future.

4.8 Further Reading

Agarwal, Anil 1992. “What is Sustainable Development,” *Down to Earth*, June 15th: 50-51

Fisher W.F. 1997. “Development and Resistance in the Narmada Valley”. In Fisher W.F.(ed) *Toward Stainable Development - Struggling over India's Narmada River*. Rawat Publications: New Delhi

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