

33 Any Progress Towards Sustainable Development or at Least Sustained Development?

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My current research includes work on policy, governance, security, and strategic analysis of the environment, natural resources, and development-related issues from an interdisciplinary and intersectoral viewpoint. One of my research concerns is that of sustainable development, its failures and challenges, and its multi-level impacts on water resources. The following thoughts refer to this issue.

As population has grown, and as human needs have increased and expectations have changed, the natural environment that supports their growth has deteriorated, and the challenges faced by governments and societies have become more complex. In a race to promote the sort of economic growth that is able to sustain human development, inexplicably people themselves have been pushed from the centre of development debates and dialogues to the periphery: people have many times lost the irrefutable priority governments should have awarded them in the search for sustainable development.

Agendas promoting human development have become multifaceted. Priorities have focused on state and social institutions that advance equitable growth with widespread social, economic, and environmental benefits, economic infrastructure and provision of social services, enabling regulatory environments and policy

instruments for public and private investments in priority areas for human development, and, more recently, technological mobility.

Over the years, effective governance has been recognized as an essential element for human development. It is regarded as necessary for the achievement of societal goals and increasingly emphasizes the importance of involving more voices, responsibilities, transparency, and accountability of formal and informal organizations. Effective governance in this sense is expected to be part of all decision-making processes, to embrace the relationships between governments and society, and to permeate laws, regulations, institutions, and formal and informal interactions.

In the quest for sustainable development, infrastructure has proved to be an indispensable component due to its role in reducing poverty and inequality and promoting economic growth. Good infrastructure is vital to help overcome growth constraints, respond to urbanization pressures, improve social and environmental conditions, encourage competitiveness and productivity, underpin improvements in the quality of life and social inclusion, and enlarge and speed up communication and mobility. This should make it a sustained priority for all public and private sectors but within a framework of sustainable development. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily happening. In many cases, infrastructural development seems to have become an end in itself instead of a means to an end, the end being sustainable development, with the human component at the heart of it.

As noted by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, the absence of infrastructure has a pervasive influence on poverty but at the same time is not a free-standing factor in lifting people out of it:

It is one thing to understand that lack of infrastructure is often the principal causal influence on the genesis of poverty, it is quite another to see how attempts at deliberate and organized removal of handicaps of underdeveloped infrastructure may actually make a difference. Do public plans and programmes actually work (a natural scepticism given the shrill chorus we hear too often these days that “the best plan is no plan”)? Can the differences that are made be seen immediately, or do they take an immensely long time?

This also seems to be frequently forgotten, not only by policymakers and politicians but also, surprisingly, by people who are not in desperate need of provision of basic services.

Prevailing wisdom suggests that infrastructure development should be based not on political priorities but rather on social and economic realities. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Prevailing wisdom also suggests that growth and equity-promoting strategies should be used to assess what might be necessary for entire populations, but especially the poor, to access basic services, as opposed to deciding, after the infrastructure has been developed, how it could be used by the poor. However, this objective too seems to have been forgotten in the race for economic development. In reality and given the size and scale of infrastructure requirements, decisions do not occur without political interference — a fact of life even when many times monopolies arising from self-serving political considerations have resulted in reduced quantities and poor quality of infrastructure services.

It is widely acknowledged that one of the main challenges facing the world at present is to develop implementable policies that positively influence the lives of billions of people all over the world who live under very different situations. The profound implications for development caused by demographic changes, the severe strains on the environment that result from rapid economic growth, and the limitations that infrastructural deficits place on access to social services in many countries constitute the panorama marking the end of the Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Development Goals in their totality are unlikely to be achieved. Was this due to poor planning? Was it that the complexity of development was not acknowledged from the beginning? Or was it that unachievable goals were selected to start with?

To add to this complexity, the relaxation of the one-child population policy in China has the potential to change the global dynamics of growth and development and may increase the already enormous pressure on human and natural environments. According to the 2012 revision of the official United Nations population estimates and projections, the world's population, 7.2 billion as of mid-2013, is projected to increase to 9.6 billion in 2050 and 10.9 billion by 2100. These calculations are based

on projected fertility declines in countries where large families are still prevalent and slight increases in fertility in countries where, on average, there are less than two children per woman. With the new population policy in the most populous country in the world, the global situation has the potential to change significantly. This decision is likely to have immense implications in terms of environment, water, energy, and food securities, not only for China but also for the rest of the world, because it is from the rest of the world that China obtains the resources required to satisfy many of its needs.

As one can appreciate, achievement of the MDGs, ultimately aimed at reducing poverty and inequality, depends on numerous interrelated global issues as well as on many actors that can influence them through multiple pathways. Infrastructure that is properly planned, managed, operated, and maintained and which has the potential to deliver universal coverage is one of the critical elements for the achievement of these goals.

Now, there is broad evidence that infrastructure coverage and quality play a vital part in the economic growth of any country as well as in investments in human capital, with both direct and indirect effects in reducing poverty. Where are the national, regional, and global efforts to understand the actual impact on society not only qualitatively but also quantitatively that are based on data that is complete and reliable? So far, the situation is just the reverse, with policy decisions taken with data that is either inadequate, incomplete, or outdated.

Regarding water development, virtuous cycles, where growth and social policies reinforce each other, are still not in place, in spite of their importance for human development. In addition, the inability of national and local governments to meet their populations' basic water needs — many times because of poor infrastructure or lack of it, as well as poor operation and maintenance practices — has resulted not only in economic but also social and environmental costs all over the world.

There is an increasingly large and expensive agenda of policy actions and investments in infrastructure that need to be undertaken. The delay in doing so has resulted in growing numbers of people without access to clean water and the resulting deterioration in their quality of life from avoidable illnesses and premature mortality or morbidity, environmental pollution of point and non-point water sources,

over-exploited and polluted rivers, lakes, and aquifers, depletion of non-renewable resources and higher costs of pumping groundwater, and seawater intrusion and land subsidence. These are just a few of the numerous issues that are affecting populations on a daily basis all over the world and that are, in many cases, already delaying social and economic progress, impacting negatively on livelihoods, degrading the environment, and hampering economic development.

For the provision of basic infrastructure services, such as water and sanitation, on which quality of livelihoods rely, and the infrastructure through which water is provided, long-term planning also leaves much to be desired. People's expectations and aspirations have changed significantly in recent years, requiring new policy responses and demanding participation, transparency, accountability, and responsibility, which was not the case before. This requires new multi-level governance practices that may or may not be possible or achievable.

To identify and understand these changes and to propose alternative policies, institutions, regulations, and strategies that are more relevant for the twenty-first century, it will be necessary to redirect policy dialogues to the fundamentals and to challenge the core of the development discourse. Development is about people, a fact that seems to have been forgotten in many places on numerous occasions. The earlier dominant role of policymakers in developing policies and trying to implement them in isolation has only a limited value in present-day society. Technocratic alternatives may not be compatible with reality until and unless societies and their views and expectations are made a part of development policy-making.

The above may be an explanation as to why, in the second decade of the 21st century, the formulation and implementation of efficient water quality management policy for the overall benefit of humankind and the environment has still not been achieved.