

Its Concept and Environmental Dimension

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Everyone talks about sustainable development (SD) nowadays. Hardly any day passes without hearing this concept, all the more so when the efforts in achieving Agenda 2030 with Sustainable Development Goals have been vigorously sought. It thus seems beneficial for all of us to revisit the significance and implications of this concept. With a series of four columns, the following aspects of SD will be covered: its concept in relation to the environment; its complex nature; necessity of multi-nodal analysis; and challenges in evaluating SD.

Now, the first appearance of this concept was when a report titled, "Our Common Future," was published through the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987, also known as "Brundtland Report." The report defined SD as "[the] development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." At the time of this first appearance, the report played an important role in acknowledging the growing status and influence of "the Global South" where the majority of the natural resources are found, while making sure that the North would not be faced to compromise their style of living (and consumption), which, altogether, made the definition of SD necessarily elusive.

It is understood that in order to realize SD, we must strike a balance among three dimensions, i.e. economy, society and environment. However, for more than three decades since Brundtland Report, the tendency and understanding of SD has always been quite siloed. In international community where discussions of SD have been taking place, when it comes to actual measures in realizing SD, they have remained largely unchanged. The policymakers and practitioners who belong to the respective dimensions do not talk to each other and the concrete measures taken in realizing SD are

thus coming only from one dimension. That is why it is very encouraging to see there are many emerging practices that do combine different dimensions, treating them not as an addendum but an integral part thereof. To name a few, running fair trade and social business enterprises, recognizing economic values of ecosystem functions, as well as recognizing human rights as a big business opportunity for human entitlements that remain unfulfilled.

However, there is one dimension that the other two are definitely dependent on; that of the environment. It casts no doubt that all economic and social activities are based on a healthy environment and finite resources existing on earth. When we think about it, "economic activity" is in effect the conversion of material and energy from a natural resource pool as input, and converted material and used energy as an output. As ecological economist Herman Daly puts it, there is no such thing as "sustainable growth" when every single economic activity is based on the natural resources existing on a finite planet. When we only have a finite amount of land, forests, oceans, and freshwater having a blind eye to ever-growing size of economic (and social) activities on this planet surely exposes us with various limits. "Planetary boundary" is a concept developed by Stockholm Resilience Centre and its former director Johan Rockström in 2009. According to their research, we the humankind have already crossed three of the nine planetary boundaries that are needed for us "to continue to develop and thrive for generations to come." But unrestrained economic and social activities have continuously mounted pressure against ecosystems. It is high time that we started to seriously incorporate and integrate the environmental dimension well into the SD concept.

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