

# QUEST TO RESCUE OUR FUTURE

Glenn Sankatsing

## **EXCERPT**

**Chapter V. Envelopment tale in development attire**

**Section 1.3.3 Sustainable development, p. 165-172**



Rescue Our Future Foundation

[www.rescueourfuture.org](http://www.rescueourfuture.org)

Amsterdam, 2016

which has to be feared, but its success”.<sup>126</sup>

Post-development approaches made many valid criticisms, but overall they did not take a constructive stance. Rather than offering an alternative development, they demanded an alternative *to* development. Post-development voices did not realize that instead of a categorical dismissal of development their critiques actually needed to target the hoaxes that had usurped the debates and strategies. As Dutch cultural anthropologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse pointed out, post-development was “directionless in the end, as a consequence of its refusal to, or lack of interest in, translating critique into construction”.<sup>127</sup> Post-development thinkers triggered severe criticisms of their shotgun nihilistic approaches, but offered no escape route for the majority of humanity and left people without an alternative path.

The inherent flaw of nihilism is its rejection of a pointless model by offering a pointless solution. This leads to inactivity, defeatism, pessimism and cynicism. Discarding the term ‘development’ wholesale is indeed evidence of resorting to a nihilist solution, a sign of capitulation rather than a constructive critique that can open new routes for a search for solutions. Post-development theoreticians overlooked the fact that development itself is not the culprit but rather the victim of a deliberately created hoax. They misread the mask for the face.

The response to the non-constructive, nihilist stance of post-development was the search for new models that could salvage the traditional development discourse. Around the mid-1980s, such a new approach emerged, which many considered to be the solution that was so desperately needed: sustainable development.

### *1.3.3 Sustainable development*

‘Sustainable development’ became a widely adopted alternative approach that had a huge impact on ‘development’ debates. The term

---

<sup>126</sup> Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *The Development Dictionary*. London, Zed Books, 1992, ‘Introduction’

<sup>127</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, After post-development. *Third World Quarterly*, 2000, 21 (2): 186

is still part of the core lexicon of friend and foe in international organizations, world summits, big business, international diplomacy and non-governmental organizations, and among representatives of governments and activists in social movements. Given the failure of the existing ‘development models’, some began to see ‘sustainable development’ as the long-awaited paradigm shift, and even a panacea.

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>128</sup> This definition in the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, better known as the *Brundtland Report*, launched the new concept globally. Many erroneously consider this document as the source of the sustainable development approach. Already in 1980, a well-known international publication under the title *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resources for Sustainable Development* had called attention to the needs of future generations. “Human beings, in their quest for economic development and enjoyment of the riches of nature, must come to terms with the reality of resource limitation and the carrying capacity of ecosystems, and must take into account the needs of future generations.”<sup>129</sup> Even before that report, the well-known German philosopher Hans Jonas had already formulated the ethical principle behind sustainability in more powerful terms: “We do not have the right to choose, or even risk, non-existence for future generations on account of a better life for the present one.”<sup>130</sup>

The idea of sustainability had already been central among earlier thinkers. Karl Marx, for example, went further than the Brundtland Report by stressing the “improved condition” in which we should hand the planet to new generations, because “a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are

---

<sup>128</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 1987, also known as the ‘Brundtland Report’, after the name of the chairwoman of the Commission, Gro Harlem Brundtland

<sup>129</sup> *World Conservation Strategy: Living Resources for Sustainable Development*. International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, IUCN-UNEP-WWF, 1980

<sup>130</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1984 (orig. 1979), p. 11

not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries, and, like *boni patres familias* [good fathers of the family], they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition.”<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, it would be highly irresponsible to pass the planet to new generations in its current unsustainable state. The self-postulated right of small, irresponsible elites to manipulate and even harm nature at will for their selfish caprices is the first abuse we need to call in question. But before we can even consider sustaining the planet, we need to refrain from destroying it.

The idea of sustainability has been central to the wisdom of many indigenous peoples. In representation of the original inhabitants of the USA, Chief Seattle wrote in a letter to the government around the mid-nineteenth century, “The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth.”<sup>132</sup> An ancient indigenous proverb of disputed origin so wisely expresses that same idea, “We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.”

Sustainability goes hand in hand with survival, and for that reason it has permeated all human settings, simply because continuity and reproduction are the quintessence of life and evolution. This is also the reason most religions and thought systems have sustainability embedded in their principles, whether in the form of the Vedic Gayatri Mantra, Pachamama, Gaya or Mother Earth.

Long before the arrival of colonialism, the famed democratic Constitution of the Iroquois Nations, a federation of North American Amerindians, expressed the right of future generations in terms that should inspire us today. “Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation”.<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, Part VI: Transformation of Surplus-Profit into Ground-Rent, Chapter 46. Building Site Rent. Rent in Mining. Price of Land

<sup>132</sup> There are several versions of this letter or speech, but all contain this phrase.

<sup>133</sup> The Constitution of the Iroquois Nations. The Great Binding Law. Gayanashagowa, <http://www.constitution.org/cons/iroquois.htm>. A special US Senate Resolution (H. Con. Res. 331) in 1988 acknowledged the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution

As these experiences across ages and communities demonstrate, sustainability has always been a driving force and a pillar of development in human evolution. The sudden hype around the term ‘sustainable development’, launched and championed by a longstanding system of envelopment, raises eyebrows. From the outset, the idea of ‘sustainable development’ has had many critical flaws that undermined its claims. Rather than a valuable invention, it appears to be a master envelopment discourse at closer inspection.

The first problem regards the concept of development itself, as we defined it in an unambiguous way with sustainability, context-relatedness, participation and an internal locus of command, as its pillars. Unsustainability renders the concept of development empty and meaningless, simply because ‘development’ that is unsustainable leads to discontinuity, which is tantamount to destructive envelopment. Development is sustainable by definition; otherwise, it is not development. The conclusion is obvious. ‘Sustainable development’ is a sheer pleonasm.<sup>134</sup> It is as meaningless as ‘participatory democracy’, since democracy that is not participatory is definitely not democracy. Repetition is not innovation. Pleonasms do not add anything, and surely not an explanation.

The field of development studies suffered hugely under this malpractice of postulating redundancy as novelty, with an avalanche of terms as ‘development from within’, ‘indigenous development’, ‘participatory development’, ‘development from below’, ‘inclusive development’, ‘development under one’s own command’, ‘self-centered development’, ‘development with ownership’, ‘contextual development’, ‘grass roots development’, ‘self-controlled development’ and ‘sustainable development’. What in the world could be non-contextual development, non-indigenous development, non-inclusive development and non-sustainable development other than alienating envelopment?

The second problem is that the concept of ‘sustainable development’ did not find its origin in care for the planet, love for nature, or fascination with natural beauty, but in anthropocentric environmentalism. The environment only became an issue of major concern

---

<sup>134</sup> Glenn Sankatsing, *The Caribbean. Archipelago of trailer societies*, *Trinidad and Tobago Review*, December 1998

when the economic elites and their support system realized that disregard of irresponsible acts against the environment was negatively affecting their profit-making capacity. The real concern of ‘sustainable development’ was sustainable economy, sustainable growth and sustainable envelopment. Indeed, it is a sham when a system of envelopment sets out to be the champion of ‘sustainable development’ for the express purpose of maintaining the mainstream economy, which represents an ecologically predatory system of profit maximization.

The swift response of the envelopment forces in the world in adopting the term ‘sustainable development’ stands in stark contrast with their longstanding damage to the planet. Desertification, deforestation and threats to biodiversity by species extinction had never rung a similar alarm bell before. Over two centuries, the global profit-based market did not care about unscrupulous economic actions that severely harmed the environment, but when environmental destruction threatened to boomerang and cut down the revenues, it became instantly alarmed. ‘Sustainable development’ was in this sense a critique that humans had not been anthropocentric enough in dominating nature for the purpose of profit, not wise enough in exploiting nature and too careless with their project to use nature for the generation of profit in a sustainable way.

Economy, not ecology, has been the driving force of the sustainable development discourse. The wellbeing or persistence of the planet never topped the dominant system’s agenda. Quite the opposite, the Earth has only taken the center stage in the debate to safeguard it as a persistent object of exploitation and a secure source for economic growth. *Sustainable economy* would be a more honest term than sustainable development.

Indeed, anthropocentrism topped all concerns. “The fundamental notion of sustainable development is based on the concepts of inter-generational equity (fairness to posterity) and intra-generational equity (fairness to contemporary persons).”<sup>135</sup> This may sound good for humans, but where is the fairness to nature and to the planet, which is under heavy assault? The hype about sustainable

---

<sup>135</sup> Edward Martin, Liberation theology, sustainable development, and postmodern public administration, *Latin American Perspectives*, 2003, 30: 82–83

development was all about humans, who may eventually blow up the Rocky Mountains or colonize the moon for precious minerals, if that would serve the aspirations of the self-postulated ‘King of the Species’.

The third problem derives from the anomaly that the champion of the sustainable development discourse has been an unsustainable, ecologically harmful system that refused transformation. Political and corporate elites and rulers embraced the term with the objective of sustaining their economy rather than saving our ecology. Numerous ‘Earth Summits’ on the environment and on sustainable development served to defend economic misconduct and to secure economic interests and privileges rather than to address the ecological crisis, let alone to come up with solutions. The disappointing summits of Copenhagen in 2009 and Paris in 2015 have proved that the goal of those gatherings of the self-proclaimed owners of the planet was not an initiative for sustainability to secure economic growth but an attempt to block any significant progress in the environmental field that could demand a high corporate toll for the rectification of ecological misconduct.

The verbosity of twenty-five years of world summits and the huge amount of paperwork did not deliver tangible progress, but only distraction from the real issue. The most important statement in all those high-level gatherings on the ecological crisis came from a twelve-year-old kid, Severn Suzuki, who silenced the world at the United Nations for five minutes when she addressed the plenary session of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. “If you don’t know how to fix it, please stop breaking it.”<sup>136</sup>

Powerful states blackmailed the poorest, forest-rich countries toward ‘sustainable development’, forcing them to leave intact their natural resources that were not strategic for global corporate capital. They blamed “slash-and-burn peasants for damaging forests, whereas tax incentives welcomed large scale destructive logging and timber companies for following ‘sustainable’ practices”.<sup>137</sup> Their

---

<sup>136</sup> Severn Suzuki addressing the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. On video.

<sup>137</sup> Subhabrata Banerjee, Who sustains whose development? Sustainable development and the reinvention of nature, *Organization Studies*, 2003, 24: 143

despicable worldview of economy overwhelming ecology came to light when they boasted about replanting two seedlings of any tree that they harvested. The thousands of other destroyed plants in the swath of the ecosystem that the felled tree had taken down did not even merit mention, because they possessed no monetary value. Evidently, their deepest concern was not to sustain the environment but to sustain logging.

Many global corporations even use the slogan of ‘sustainable development’ in their vision–mission statement, while they continue destroying the planet for growing profits. The oxymoron of an environmentally friendly market economy is not about greening the planet but about greening greed. The endgame of such a predatory system is that economic wealth that destroys ecological health will make all poor.

We must take to heart Subhabrata Banerjee’s warning that “we should not entertain notions about global sustainability unless we know whose globe and whose sustainability we are talking about”<sup>138</sup>. Sustainability is a virtue, which is a primary reason to protect the term from abuse by big government and big business.

Decades of ‘sustainable development’, spearheaded by the agents of everlasting economic growth only brought us closer to the abyss. When an unsustainable system pursues its sustainability, what we have is not ‘sustainable development’ but ‘sustainable envelopment’. Global envelopment does not care about the environment, but it is merely concerned with system maintenance under an economic growth model at the service of profit generation that perpetuates domination, asymmetric relations, structural inequality and injustice.

The conclusion is clear. ‘Sustainable development’ has been an outgrowth of the anthropocentric goal of keeping the planet fit enough for a perpetual assault in the name of sustainable economic growth. This is the reason behind the disappointing results of all the environmental summits, which so far have been dominated by the very states and governments that are primarily responsible for the destruction of our planet.

---

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., pp. 170–171



Those who had refused to sign the minimal agreement at Kyoto or sabotaged the proposals of the world summits to stop destroying the Earth may have political authority and strategic military power, but they lack the moral authority to speak and, therefore, would render humanity a valuable service by refraining from using the word ‘sustainability’. Their core position, unscrupulously presented at each successive world forum, has been their unwillingness to make the required ‘economic sacrifice’ to reduce the destructive impacts of their admittedly harmful economic activities, regardless of whether the planet might overheat beyond the tipping point. How long must humanity endure such ecological felonies by elites that unilaterally destroy our common good for their private wealth amassment, while bluntly telling us right to our faces that they refuse to cease their misconduct even though it may kill us all?

#### **1.4 Fate of ‘development’ thought**

The main reason the many proposed ‘development’ theories and paradigms have failed is that they had little to do with development and were rather modes of optimization of envelopment. Far from opening new horizons, they served the social obliteration of other destinies by incorporating them in an expansionist foreign project that undermined their development chances. An envelopment mindset marred the whole continuum between the pleonasm of sustainable development and the nihilism of post-development. They legitimized expansionism by declaring ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘developing’ societies inept at shaping their own paths to the future and being in urgent need of help from more ‘civilized’ tribes. Such an interventionist hoax of development provided the rationale for global envelopment that provoked political and economic instability, crises, traumas and unbearable deprivation and poverty on the planet. Not one single development paradigm has proved capable of providing a viable alternative for the troubles of subjugated and enveloped societies.

The ones who have economically victimized peoples and countries for centuries still present themselves as economic saviors.