

## **Ethical Foundations of the Sustainability and the Sustainable Development**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of sustainability or sustainable development emerged as a concern in early 1980's. It was equated with the environmental issues firstly. Then, it attained economic and social meanings as well. Nevertheless, the value of the lastly attained meaning of sustainability, which is social, is highly neglected. Sustainable development or sustainability is not just about ecology or natural resources. It is about the relationship between these resources and individuals and thus sustainability encompasses all kinds of issues related to human beings as sustainable, i.e ecological development, cannot be imagined without human beings living in it.

In this study, sustainability will be evaluated as a value system that highlights the importance of continuation of natural as well as cultural resources. Although the term sustainability or sustainable development became famous in late 20th century, as a value system, its existence may be traced back to the ancient Greece. In the writings of early political philosophers, it is possible to find the emphasis on the importance of nature, reproduction, importance of future generations, significance of continuation of cultures and human kind, which are the core intentions behind the need for sustainable development and the term sustainability embraces all of these subjects. In the context of this study, the writings of Aristotle, Kant, Mill, will be analyzed with an aim of finding the foundations of the concept of sustainability

### **1.INTRODUCTION**

There are remarkable turning points, which change and shape the rest of the human life and its environment and there have been changes that are irreversible and have tremendous effects throughout the history. There is no need to highlight all of them for the prevailing discussion, yet, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution are the two of them that seem to pave the way for the current discussions on sustainability and sustainable development as French revolution is the creator of modern values such as “liberté, égalité, fraternité” and the industrial revolution is the turning point for capitalist development.

The new modes of production, at first, immediately celebrated and spread throughout all Europe and the motto of French revolution is still in the agenda of liberals. However, there have been side effects of industrialization. Due to the increase in population, rapid urbanization led to the unplanned urbanization, labor force exploited, pollution emerged and so on and the celebrated motto of the French revolution, which highlights the importance of equality, did not realize itself in the sense that the new mode of production has brought the

new type of inequalities. Nearly two centuries, everything has changed both in appearance and in essence.

From the 1970's and on, there have been new waves of concerns, might be called postmodern concerns, which seek for a remedy for damages that have done both to the nature and human existence itself. Now the bringing of the industrialization is being discussed. The level of pollution increased and spread all over the world, natural resources are exploited and in some places, they are consumed off, we face with the extinction of animal species. Besides the damage that has given to the nature, individuals also have faced with crucial problems. Inequality increased among nations and individuals, the gap between rich and poor is tremendously opened, hunger becomes a vital problem for most of the countries in the world, and cultures are assimilated and disappear. So the world has changed very rapidly and from 1970's and on, people are trying to fix this situation and trying to find new ways for maintenance of nature and humankind.

There have been many discussions on sustainable development and each area of study might state different types of argument according to their research area. Environmentalist might offer different solution on the basis of their priorities and economist might propose an entirely different and also controversial one. However, in essence, each area seeks to maintain something, something that is crucial for human existence, for nature. Therefore, this paper seeks to provide that common point embraces all area. In this study, sustainability and sustainable development will be evaluated as a moral value that highlights the importance of continuation natural as well as social resources. As a moral value, its existence can be traced back to the writings of ancient Greek philosophers. In their writings, there are emphases on the importance of nature, reproduction, importance of future generation. Most importantly, there is emphasis of "knowledge" and consciousness of individual behavior of all kind, which is important for the preservation of resources. Sustainability and sustainable development, ideally, construct its agenda on the concept of justice, equality and redistribution and these concepts were best understood in the writings of philosophers. To define sustainability as a moral value clearly indicates that all individuals are subject in this issue and there is a common point that can embrace economic, social and environmental sustainability, regardless of their own 'agenda' to sustainable development.

## **2. What is Sustainable Development?**

Sustainable development is defined in famous Brundtland Report as "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 organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs" (WECD, 1987, 43). What is needed to highlight is that the concept of sustainable development encompasses all people and all nations, without discriminating the poor or the rich. The sustainable development necessitates

the development of the poor regions, protection of environmental resources in a way so that both current and future generations will be benefited from it equally. It is a global concern.

Sustainable development is not only about the development or environment. It binds three different dimensions and proposes us a kind of understanding. It has environmental, economic and social aspects and without these three aspects, it is hard to speak about sustainable development. Brandl defines sustainability as “the relationship between the social and ecological systems, which needs to be shaped in such a way that it will not destabilize the system as a whole” (2002: 13). Sustainable development is not about conservation of resources for future generations, it is about the proper use of them so that both current and future generation can profit from them and this is why economics is crucial as through economics all sources of capital can be restructured.

## **2.1 Environmental Aspect Sustainability**

Environmental Sustainability is one of the crucial aspect and the key figures of the concept of Sustainable Development. Environmental Sustainability, in other words, environmental protection is an approach which aims to restore and re-establish the disturbed balance of the world and thus, to sustain this order for the future generations. According to John Morelli, “environmental sustainability could be defined as a condition of balance, resilience and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity” (2011: 23).

Environmental concerns dated back to second half of 20th century. Especially, after the Second World War, the development efforts, arm races, nuclear tests began to threaten the world and quash the biosphere balances. With the rapid increase in world population and the rising of life standards, pollution increased and this situation has led to a rapid depletion of natural resources. In addition to these problems, climate change, stratospheric ozone depletion, trans-boundary air and water pollution, acid precipitation, loss of biodiversity, desertification and deforestation pose a threat to the achievement of sustainable development objectives.

The increase in environmental problems reached the level of threatening the life and human beings began to find out some preventive solutions to be able to deal with these difficulties. Due to the struggle among scholars to find solutions, an environmental ethics emerged. Arzu Özyol argues that there are two main approaches in term of ethics related to environment. The first one is briefly, nature is valuable because of it is useful for human beings. According to second approach, each entity, whether useful to human beings or not, has a specific value. In this context, while the concept of sustainable development containing the development strategies, at the same time it takes attention to the set of moral values. ( -- )

Numerous recent studies have offered solutions to the problem of achieving environmental sustainability, the long-term preservation of environment for the future (Whitford, Wong, 2009: 190). However it seems that more solid and urgent measures must be taken as soon as possible. Robert Goodland takes attention to a point and he states that “every passing year means sustainability has to be achieved for an additional 100 million people. This is why environmental sustainability has a time urgency” (1995: 13).

Today’s world unfortunately is not encouraging according to many important indicators and if the world continues to change negatively, the future generations may not be able to maintain healthy and productive lives. Now there are still many problems which are seriously threatening the whole world day by day. The environmental inequalities increasingly continue and everything is becoming more complex.

## **2.2 Economic Aspect of Sustainability**

The relation between the economy and the concept of sustainability may be the most controversial topic within the discipline. Economy is based on utility and this utility comes with the consumption. However, as it occurs in all social science, there is a return in economics, return maybe the ancient understanding of interrelatedness of all branches of science. For instance, economics, by some scholars, began to be interpreted from different areas like social and environmental. Costanza and O’Neill argues that “we need to move from economics that ignores this interdependent to one that acknowledges and builds upon it- an economics that is fundamentally ecological in its basic view of the problems that now face our species at this crucial point in its history” (1996: 975)

There are many different interpretation of economic sustainability. However, two of them are highly debated, and in a sense, are controversial ones. First one is the neoclassical approach to sustainability and the other is ecological approach to economical sustainability. Neoclassical approach can be characterized by not development but growth and accumulation of capital. Another important aspect of the neoclassical approach is substitutability. Economics, in neoclassical sense, is about utility and consumption. Robert Nelson argues that if people derive much pleasure from nature, then, preservation of natural conditions may be a high social priority” (1995: 138)

When the subject is sustainability, orthodox economists “are concerned with sustainability in the sense of maintaining acceptable levels of human well-being over time and thus are concerned with the capacity of natural environment and other social assets to meet human wants and needs... If economic substitution possibilities are high, natural disruption is not a special cause for concern in the economic model” (Norton and Toman, 1997:555). On the other hand, if utility of the nature is higher than its disruption, then, it will be sustained by necessary precautions. Neoclassical economists state that environmental characteristics, which are necessary for growth in economy, can be replaced or ‘substituted’ by human made substitutes. Any source of capital can be replaced by any other, namely, natural capital can be replaced by human made or manufactured capital.

On the other hand, ecological economics is in favor of greater sustainability or strong sustainability. Supporters of this realize the fact that natural capital may not be substituted by any other capital, at least, not each of them can find substitute. There are renewable and nonrenewable resources and if nonrenewable resources are diminished, then, it means, there is no substitution for them. Ecological economists argue that natural capitals as well as any kind of resources should be maintained so that they help to the productive process.

In economics, it is important not to forget that there is no substitution for everything in the world and even demand in something is not high right now, that doesn't mean that, demand will not increase in the long run. In economical term, in order to reach a sustainable development, it is crucial to see the effect of our actions in the long run. Economic aspect of sustainable development can be reached through this way, through not wasting any kind of resources for the sake of short run interests and think about the future and necessities of future, so to foresee the long term effects of actions.

### **2.3. Social Aspect Sustainability**

As it is stated above, sustainable development should encompass three spheres, namely, ecological, environmental and social and try to reach these goals. So the third aspect of sustainability is the social one. Sustainable development cannot be thought without its social dimension, it is the management of natural, social and human capital. Economic and environmental sustainability may provide necessary environment to growth and maintenance of natural as well as human made capital, but, with a thin interaction among individuals, with poverty and hungry spread around the world, with inequality or in general without quality of life, human kind cannot reach a high level of civilization, even they own a perfect environment. For this reason, social sustainability should be equally treated and understood for the sake of sustainable development.

Due to the very ambiguity of the term social, social sustainability cannot be defined in a single, comprehensive definition. There is no consensus among scholars about social sustainability. However, this cannot be interpreted as irrelevance of the term in sustainable development or lack of scientific background. Dissensus among the interpretation of the term, in a way, creates a comprehensive understanding of the social sustainability, diverse statements and components are added to the term by different scholars. As Ranciere (2001) puts it dissensus creates real democracy through invoking others to act in order to be seen or heard. So the term social sustainability, by being characterized differently, becomes more influential by being analyzed and defined in every aspect.

Littig and Grießler define social sustainability as “a quality of societies. It signifies the nature-society relationships, mediated by work, as well as relationships within the society. Social sustainability is given, if work within a society and the related institutional arrangements satisfy an extended set of human needs and are shaped in a way that nature and its reproductive capabilities are preserved over a long period of time and the normative claims of social justice, human dignity and participation are fulfilled” (2005: 72). Littig and

Grießler put great emphasis on the dimension of work. Their definition is closely related with work as satisfaction of human needs and reproductively and also exchange between societies are created by work. For them, social sustainability is rather a socio-ecological process. Their claim is that there are three core indicators to evaluate the social dimensions of sustainability which are “satisfaction of basic needs, social justice and social coherence” (2005: 75)

Polese and Stren argue that “development that is compatible with harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population” (2000: 15-16). In their understanding of social sustainability, again, the quality of life has a great meaning. Communities and cultures should be protected while at the same time integrated to the society. For them, civil society is crucial, which helps to reorganize society and create an harmony within it. Sachs argues that “a strong definition of social sustainability must rest on the basic values of equity and democracy, the latter meant as the effective appropriation of all human rights – political, civil, economic, social and cultural- by all people” (1999: 27) In the beginning of this work, the motto of French revolution is given and as it is clear that these are highly related with the motto, especially with the two of them, namely, equality and liberty.

To sum up social sustainability is as crucial as environmental or economical sustainability, as “sustainability describes a topic of research that is basically social, addressing virtually the entire process by which societies manage the material conditions of their reproduction, including the social, economic, political and cultural principles that guide the distribution of environmental resources” (Becker et al., 1999: 4). Social dimension is concerned with individuals, rather than nations, it is, at least, satisfaction of all humanly and all basic needs.

### **3.Sustainability, Sustainable Development and Ethics**

All three dimensions that construct the sustainable development is explained, it is clear that, although they use different discourses and pay attention on different sides of sustainable development, they have something in common, the need for the maintenance of what we have now for the future generations. They are complementary in some respects. They all emphasize distribution of resources among individuals, importance of harmony among and between societies, the value of a quality of life, justice and cohesion. These concepts are not irrelevant for us, these are the modern values that should encompass all people and should be encouraged to apply by all. These are the values that all liberal democracies and individuals should internalize. In this paper, the argument is that commonalities of these three aspects ensure that sustainable development cannot be understood without philosophy in general or ethics in particular. “If sustainability is, as is often suggested, found at the intersection of the domains of environment, society and economy, it must follow from an underlying rationality that is common to all three and more basic than that which is peculiar to each one

individually. We argue that this unifying underlying rationality is ethics” (Banon Gomis et al., 2011:179)

In the context of this paper, it will be argued that, sustainable development is a moral obligation, an ethical issue. It is not a matter of choice to sustain something at the expense of another thing. It cannot be simply put into an area of science. As Solow argues “sustainability is a moral obligation is a general obligation not a specific one. It is not an obligation to preserve this or preserve that. It is an obligation, if you want to make sense out of it, to preserve the capacity to be well off, to be as well off as we” (1991:13). If we explain and understand sustainability as such, it is the job of all individuals to preserve what they have. Science only may not manage to spread the notion of sustainability but if individuals start to realize this as a moral or ethical value, it would be great step towards sustainable development.

In this section, as it is stated above, the ethical foundations of sustainability and sustainable development will be analyzed. These analyses will be around the concepts of justice, equality, importance of nature, human development, economic development and maintenance of certain values as well as resources. These concepts are closely related to the sustainability and sustainable development as sustainability and sustainable development include the ideas of promoting the well being of all human beings, poor as well as the riches, diminishing the inequalities in terms of access to natural resources and their use, of income and of all sorts of services. So, sustainability and sustainable development may enter our scientific literatures in the late twentieth century but context of them have always been in our lives.

### **3.1.Aristotle**

As we know, Aristotle is one of the most important founding figures in Western philosophy. He was a Greek philosopher and polymath, a student of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great.

We can clearly find many traces about sustainable developments on Aristotle’s works. For instance, he says that “man is the noblest of creatures on earth and so that, it’s clear human being originated in accordance with nature” (2007: 30). As a result, he stressed that people should live in a harmony with the nature as a course of its nature. Sustainability has already this sense which aims to maintain the world’s balance while preserving the nature. From another aspect, he taught in one sentence that excess of anything is bad. In here, that phrase implies that too much of even a good thing is bad. He argues that “we must not exert ourselves nor relax our efforts too much nor too little, but to an intermediate extent and as the right rule dictates” (1999, 91).

Aristotle drew attention to the importance of the mind and he considered the ignorance as something harmful. According to him “a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general”(1999, 94). By following this comment, it’s possible to reach a

conclusion: maybe a century ago, it was not possible to perceive these negative changes about the natural world balance and maybe for this reason people continued to destroy the nature unconsciously. But today, with the increase in technology and the level of knowledge it is possible to identify the things which are harmful to the environment and to find the ways how to avoid or deal with these difficulties. For example, it is so obvious that if the world's exposition continues in this way, most of the natural resources will not regenerate itself and as a result of this, many plants and animal species will disappear and as a strong possibility, without healthy ecosystems, human beings will not survive on this World as well. Consequently, Aristotle emphasized the importance of wisdom and the necessitation of compliance with nature for a good living.

Sustainable development also aims to increase the level of prosperity in less developed countries and the World is portrayed as a global village at present. From here, we can come to such a conclusion: people should live as a whole for the sake of a common interest. In fact, this idea is parallel with Aristotle's taught. He considered that "he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature". So people should also live compatible with themselves as well as the nature. Aristotle argues "there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other"( Politics, 1999: 4). Therefore, here what is important is that no one can remain insensitive to the developments in the world. Each individual has a responsibility to himself and his society.

### **3.2. John Stuart Mill**

John Stuart Mill is one of the most influential philosopher or political economist that contribute to the liberal values, such as liberty, private property, individual freedom and minimum state control. In the context of our current discussion, these are our crucial concepts. Sustainability and sustainable development contain these concepts as it requires decrease in the level of poverty, equal redistribution of resources, freedom in the context of being sufficient and independent in maintaining lives. So it is important to explore Mill when discussing the ethical foundations of sustainability and sustainable development.

It is now questionable whether private property is necessary and something beneficial or not but this is irrelevant for our discussion. Mill has a chapter on property, he explains why it is necessary, under which circumstances it should be distributed, what are conditions to own a property in his book called Principles of Political Economy. For Mill, private property is something important but equality and just sharing is necessary and should be kept in mind when distribution happens. "If private property were adopted, we must presume that it would be accompanied by none of the initial inequalities and injustices which obstruct the beneficial operation of the principle in old societies" (Principles of Political Economy, Book II, Chapter I). Its relevance to our discussion is that, social aspect of sustainable development contains housing and security, which for us are closely related with each other. Social aspect contains basic human needs and housing is one of them.



Another important issue that Mill takes into account is about the raw materials. It is also one of the most crucial concerns of the sustainable development. Mill argues that “the essential principle of property being to assure to all persons what they have produced by their labour and accumulated by their abstinence, this principle cannot apply to what is not the produce of labour, the raw material of the earth... it would be height of injustice, to let the gift of nature be engrossed by individuals” (Book II, Chapter I). Now if we apply this to our current situation, developed countries have both the capacity and the will to use raw materials for their own sake. However, this produces injustice among both individuals and the nations. Raw materials do not belong individuals or nations; so, it is not apt to the nation to deplete them. “No man made the land. It is the original inheritance of the whole species. Its appropriation is wholly a question of general expediency” (Book II, Chapter II). In the later chapters, Mill again turns to the subject of natural resources and called them “inheritance of human race” and argues that “there must be regulations for the common enjoyment of it. What rights, and under what conditions, a person shall be allowed to exercise over any portion of this common inheritance cannot be left undecided” (Book V, Chapter I). Now, with the increase in the environmental pollutions, some standards and some limits have been put to generate sustainable development.

The ethics behind the statements of Mill can be called utilitarianism but not in a negative sense. Utility is now being understood as something negative and material. However, for Mill this is not the case. As it is obvious from the previous statements above, Mill desires a life that is most favorable by all individuals not only by the self. “The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned...utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole” (Utilitarianism, Chapter II). The utility in Mill can be similar to eudomania in Aristotle if not the same. So the contents of sustainability and sustainable development, can be found in Mill’s writings

### **3.3. Kant**

In the Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals, Kant explains what morality is, how it can be achieved, what is the source of morality. Through this work, Kant, clarifies what make moral principles universal and can be applicable by all rational beings, namely, by all humans. “we have to admit that morality’s law applies so widely that it holds •not merely for men but for all rational beings as such, •not merely under certain contingent conditions and with exceptions but with absolute necessity •and therefore unconditionally and without exceptions” (15). He defines two kinds of imperative (imperative is the demand of rationality, the reasons behind the action, it is the motivating principle of the action), one is hypothetical and the other is categorical. Hypothetical imperative is, he defines, “the practical necessity of some possible action as a means to achieving something else that one does or might want” (19), this kind of imperative is about reaching another aim through doing something. So the

action, is itself, is not the end, the consequences of the action is the inspired end. Whereas, the categorical imperative, he explains, “is represented an action as being objectively necessary in itself without regard to any other end” (19). So the action that is derived from the categorical imperative should be an end in itself, it is done without measuring the consequences, it is done for itself.

Kant explains two types of imperative in detailed. He argues that categorical imperative “is only law that carries with it the concept of a necessity(·’This action must be performed’·) that is unconditional and objective and hence universally valid; and commands are laws that must be obeyed even when one would prefer not to...it can be called a command in the strict sense” (20). What makes categorical imperative is universal is its objectivity and unconditionality, it doesn’t serve a specific purpose, there are no expected consequences and there might not be a result at all, it is done for its own sake, for the sake of morality. From this point, it can be easily related to the concept of sustainability and sustainable development. Even though there is an expected result in sustainable development, this result would not affect us in near future. Previous and current generations are not in an immediate danger of violation of natural as well as cultural resources. However, we are aware of the fact that the next generations may not be as lucky as we are because we are not as cautious as the previous generations were.

Kant offers universal law of nature, which holds three principles, which are (i)“act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature” (24) (ii)“act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means” (29), and (iii)“the idea of the will of every rational being as a will laying down universal law (30). These three principle can be easily applied to the sustainability and thus, to sustainable development. First principle argues that one should act as if s/he determines the universal law, a law that is applicable by all people and preferred to be applied. Prosperity is something that have both subjective and objective imperative. For instance, I want to be rich, this is something subjective, but everyone wants to live a good life, this makes it objective. If our generation desires to live in a perfect harmony with nature and its resources, if our generation prefers a world in peace and if our first concern is to decrease the level of poverty, then, these should be our maxims and we should take necessary cautions but while doing this next generations should be in our considerations as they will also prefer such an environment, and as they have equal share with the current generation. This is also related to the second principle. The needs and desires of humans are, at least when speak of basic ones, similar. So no human being can be seen as a mean, they are end in themselves. This is applicable to nation-states as well. Nations, as they are composed of human beings, cannot be seen as mean to reach to an end, i.e, a natural resources. Poor countries are threatened by developed countries if they have natural resources; they are in a constant danger of civil wars or external threats. So if a nation does not prefer to become a mean of other individual state to reach an end, it should not treat a nation as such.

#### 4.CONCLUSION

Sustainability and sustainable development are crucial for human beings. There are many responsibilities for individuals to sustain what we have now and leave a peaceful and well organized society to the next generations. It is also important to note that everyone has a responsibility in this process.

To show the ethical foundations of sustainability and sustainable development makes it clear that it is not only the business organizations or civil society organizations are responsible in this process, rather, it is obvious that each individual should take place and do what is necessary. All three aspects of sustainable development and the concept of sustainability itself require human beings' endeavor to maintain the existence of natural as well as other forms of resources. Ethics, in this process, ensure an obligation for human beings, it is not a technical process that can be kept outside of the most intimate human relations. Therefore, individuals should internalize this process, and do the best they can because it is a moral obligation, it is a way of conducting virtues live

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