

The Ethical Foundations of Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

One of the major challenges of the 21st century is the need to harmonize efforts at environmental conservation with endeavours to foster human development. This challenge has been on the world agenda for several decades, and was given great visibility through a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. The report, popularly known as the Brundtland Report, calls for sustainable development to deal with the twin challenges of environmental conservation and human development. This paper reflects on the concept of sustainable development, and unveils some of the ambiguities and politics that have militated against the attainment of this noble objective. The thesis of the paper is that the imperative to attain sustainable development is a moral one, requiring all moral agents to rise to their individual and collective responsibility to secure the well-being of humans as well as that of the natural environment.

Key words

Environmental conservation, sustainable development, the right to development

Introduction

The 1970's and 1980's marked important milestones in the discourse on environmental conservation: environmental issues became prominent in many areas of academic and practical research than ever before. Philosophy as a discipline was not left behind: it was during this period that environmental ethics emerged as a distinct area of philosophical inquiry. One major development during that period was the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) with its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya following the 1972 United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden (Rowland 1973). The main motivation behind this development was the realization that the natural environment was increasingly becoming unable to sustain life, both human and other forms. Of great concern was the need to put under scrutiny the environmental consequences of the various human activities. Thus in the 1970's and 1980's, humanity was asking the all important question: how do we survive? The attempt to answer this and related questions has greatly influenced the formulation of many policies and action plans in such areas as

environmental conservation, management, and development. Thus the environmental question was squarely placed on the world agenda.

Dower (1992, 3) notes that since the 1980's, two important concepts have been at the centre of the debate on environmental conservation and development, namely, "the right to development" and "sustainable development". In 1986, the United Nations made the now famous right to development declaration, which asserts among other things that "all human beings have inalienable human right to development" (UN 1986, 41/128 Preamble Paragraph 2). The declaration then goes on to define the right to development as entitlement to:

A comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process which aims at the constant improvement of the wellbeing of the entire population and of all its individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting thereof (UN 1986, 41/128 Preamble Paragraph 2).

Almost three decades since this declaration was made, the world, particularly the Third World, is far from realizing these ideals. In most third world countries, available statistics paint a grim picture, in that more than fifty percent of the populations in those countries live in abject poverty and glaring inequalities that severely undermine their ability to enjoy their human dignity. Of great significance is the dual gap: on the one hand, there is the gap between the poor nations of the South and the rich nations of the North, and on the other, that between the few wealthy individuals and the poor masses within the poor nations. These realities make us look back and question the efficacy of the UN declaration of development as an inalienable human right.

Of great interest to this paper is the fact that the definition of development in the UN declaration makes no explicit reference to the environmental question, yet the declaration raises fundamental issues, some of which may be inconsistent with the ideal of sustainable development. Perhaps had the UN accurately anticipated the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, it would have modified its declaration to read "the right to sustainable development". The said report, frequently informally referred to as the Brundtland Report, was prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development that was appointed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1983 to look into ways of harmonizing environmental conservation and human development needs (WCED 1987).

Nonetheless, the UN's recognition that development is a human rights issue is an important milestone in the discourse on development and environmentalism. In our view this recognition underscores the ethical underpinnings not only of development, but also of environmental conservation. It is this ethical foundation that this paper seeks to critically explore and clarify.

This paper is divided into six sections, including this introductory one. The second section discusses the concept of "sustainable development". The third focuses on the politics surrounding the notion, objectives and ideals of sustainable development. The fourth section advances the central argument of the paper- the ethical foundations of sustainable development. The fifth section focuses on the ideals of sustainable development, before the sixth presents the conclusions.

The Concept of Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development was introduced in the 1970's, when it was first proposed as a conservation strategy (Trzyna 1998, 96). It was adopted and popularized as a world conservation strategy through the efforts of three influential conservation bodies - the then International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resource (IUCN) which has since been renamed World Conservation Union (WCU), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (Trzyna 1998,75).

However, it was not until the 1980's that the concept of sustainable development gained great prominence in the context of environmental conservation and development. In particular, the concept of sustainable development gained greater popularity through the Brundtland Report (WCED1987) and Agenda 21 (UNEP 1992). Agenda 21 was the document that was the culmination of the United Nations conference on environment and development, also known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. This summit focused on ways of mitigating worsening levels of poverty and deteriorating ecosystems; in a word, it was about ecological sustainability.

Since the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED1987) and Agenda 21 (UNEP 1992), the concept of sustainable development has dominated debate and influenced policies, decisions and actions pertaining to conservation and development. However, the concept remains fraught with ambiguities and vagueness, hence the various conceptualizations. Hardoy *et.al.* appreciate this point:

The literature on sustainable development has grown so rapidly that already there are at least 80 different definitions of sustainable development or part of it. Within these definitions are many different understandings of what is meant by the words “development” and “sustainable” (Hardoy *et.al.* 1992, 172).

Consequently, it is apposite to review some of the definitions of “sustainable development” commonly encountered to illustrate the foregoing point and to clarify the meaning of the concept.

One such definition is by Goodland and Ledec (1993, 245), who conceives sustainable development as “a pattern of social and structural economic transformation (i.e. development) which optimizes the benefits in the present without jeopardizing the potential for similar benefits in the future.” This definition makes no direct reference to the environment or environmental conservation. However, it implies recognition of the instrumental value of the natural environment because the said development cannot be realised without the natural environment providing the material base for it.

Another attempt to define sustainable development is by Dower (1992, 110), who, after acknowledging the difficulties involved in defining development, defines sustainability as follows: “an activity, state of affairs or process is sustainable if it is capable of being sustained, that is capable of continuing in the future without change”. Dower seems to assume that when the term “sustainability” is used together with development, it clarifies the meaning of the phrase “sustainable development”. However, as it turns out, Dower’s definition is tautological, and hence does not shed much light on the intersection between the twin notions of environmental conservation and development.

The definitions above serve to illustrate that the concept of sustainable development is complex, even fluid, and has been variously interpreted. This paper analyses the ethical foundations of sustainable development based mainly on the definitions by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the Report of the World commission on Environment and Development (WCED) discussed below.

The two most influential definitions of sustainable development have been given respectively by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), since renamed World Conservation Union (WCU) and the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), commonly known as the Brundtland Report. The question posed by the IUCN was: “When do we characterise something as sustainable?” The IUCN stated that “an activity, structure or process is said to be sustainable if for all purposes,

it can continue forever” (cited in Achterberg1994, 140). Accordingly, it defined sustainable development as “improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems” (cited in Trzyna 1998, 76). This definition captures quite comprehensively the link between the notions of environmental conservation and development. The intricate connectedness of development and environmental conservation is captured respectively in the expressions “... improving quality of life” and “... living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems” (cited in Trzyna1998, 76). We shall return to the definition by the IUCN in a later section when we analyse the ethical foundations of the ideal of sustainable development.

Finally, let us consider the definition of sustainable development by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), commonly referred to as “the Brundtland Commission”. The Commission was set up by the United Nations General Assembly in 1983, with Gro Harlem Brundtland, the then Norwegian Prime Minister, as its President. The commission submitted its report, which came to be popularly referred to as the Brundtland Report, in 1987. The report is also commonly known as “Our Common Future”. The main mandate of the Brundtland Commission was to work out a strategy that would strike a balance between the increasing deleterious effects of human activities and their impact on the natural environment on the one hand, and human development needs on the other. Given this mandate, defining “sustainable development” was a major task of the commission. Indeed, to many the Brundtland report has been synonymous with the idea of sustainable development. The Brundtland Commission accordingly proceeded to define sustainable development as a “dynamic process designed to meet today’s needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, 8). Thus defined, the phrase “sustainable development” does not make explicit reference to environmental conservation. Nevertheless, Dower correctly observes:

It is quite clear that the context in which the idea [of sustainable development] has gained prominence is that of environmental problems both to do with the using up of resources and the problem of future shortages, and to do with the general effects of human activity, particularly industrial activity, on the natural environment in terms of pollution, land degradation, alteration of the atmosphere and so on (Dower 1997, 93).

The Brundtland Report itself lends credence to Dower’s analysis above when it observes that “the present development trends left increasing numbers of people poor and vulnerable while at the same time degrading the environment” (WCED 1987, 8). This presents sustainable

development as an ideal whose main challenge to its realization is how to harmonize human needs with environmental conservation.

The Politics of Sustainable Development

The call for sustainable development as a world strategy to respond to the twin problems of environmental conservation and human development has over the years elicited varied reactions and interpretations ranging from overwhelming endorsement to scepticism, and sometimes even to cynicism. For example, according to Trzyna (1998, 76), sustainable development is a social and political process; it is also an integrating concept, a way of bringing together ecological, economic and social aspects of a problem, a holistic approach to things. This conception presents sustainable development as a “Marshal Plan” responding to the myriad developmental and environmental problems.

Other writers are more cautious in their endorsement of sustainable development. For instance, Worster (1995, 417) cautions that as a popular slogan, sustainable development needs a clear definition of its goals and destination, lest it “risks being a path to a place that is unknown, hence meandering to a dead end.” To him, it is clear that sustainable development is a process, a means rather than an end in itself.

On his part, Shiva (1992, 189) distinguishes two types of sustainability. *First*, he talks about sustainability which revolves around the market. This type of sustainability, Shiva contends, “involves maintaining supplies of raw material for industrial production”. According to this type of sustainability, conservation is seen in terms of the ability to continue to provide raw materials for development, with profit as the overriding motive. This, according to Shiva, is the popular conception of sustainable development in Western discourse. Shiva has dismissed this as pseudo-sustainability, analogous to “plastering a calf with mud to turn it into a cow instead of letting it grow into one” (Shiva 1992, 189). This view is shared by other philosophers, for example Worster (1995, 417) referred to above, who has argued that nothing less than a philosophical revolution is required to challenge the dominant secular materialist Western world view which is destructive to the natural environment.

The *second* interpretation of sustainability, and the one which Shiva considers to be the real meaning of the term, is sustainability which focuses on nature and people. This interpretation is premised on the view that nature is the very foundation of human livelihood and being.

According to Shiva (1992, 191), sustaining nature therefore implies “maintaining the integrity of nature’s cycles and rhythms”. In this regard, sustainability is only achievable “if the market and production processes are reshaped on the logic of nature’s returns not on the logic of profit, capital accumulation and return on investment.”

Achterhius’ view of sustainable development is highly controversial. In his seminal essay titled “The Lie of Sustainable Development”, Achterhius (1994, 198) dismisses sustainability as popularly understood as a lie, the lie of sustainable development. He adopts Hannah Arendt’s analysis to develop his argument. Arendt (1958) had argued that sustainability was inconsistent with the modern economic society. Simply put, her argument was that conservation would stand in the way of rapid production which she opined was the hallmark of modern economy. In other words, increased and accelerated growth were pre-requisites for a well functioning and growing capitalistic economy.

Arendt’s analysis had been developed well before the question of environmental conservation was on the world agenda, but it accurately raised fundamental questions that, if sustainability is to be moved from the level of popular political rhetoric to praxis, must be confronted. One of the implications of her analysis is that the ideal of sustainable development may require slowing down “growth”. Goodland and Ledec (1993, 251) help us to develop this point further when he outlines some of the salient requirements of sustainable development. We focus here on two of these requirements that we consider most relevant to the point under discussion.

First, Goodland and Ledec contend that sustainable development requires using non-renewable mineral resources in a manner which does not unnecessarily preclude easy access to them by future generations. *Second*, Goodland and Ledec point out that sustainable development requires depleting non-renewable energy at a slow enough rate so as to insure the high probability of an orderly societal transition to renewable energy sources (Goodland and Ledec 1993, 251). Both conditions above may in practice slow down the pace at which Third World countries use their natural resources to try and “catch up” with the economically developed nations. This in turn raises the all-important questions of equity, justice and even quality of human life for the majority of Third World populations already ravaged by poverty. These concerns have been well raised both in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development and the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (“the Brundtland Report”). On the other hand, and most importantly, the Third World

situation, if not well addressed, may end up in a sort of vicious cycle because excessive poverty is known to accelerate ecological problems, thereby frustrating efforts at approximating the ideal of sustainable development as succinctly stated in the Brundtland Report in the following words:

Sustainable development requires societies to meet human needs by increasing productive potential and by ensuring equitable economic, social, political opportunities for all. Sustainable development must not endanger the atmosphere, soil and ecosystems that support life on earth. It is a process of change in which resource use, economic policies, technological development, population growth and industrial structures are in harmony and enhance current and future potential for human progress (WCED 1987).

Yet critics of sustainable development as popularized see it as part of the wider scheme by the West to keep poor nations in a perpetual state of dependence. They cite the idea of “going slow” in the use of natural resources inherent in the ideal of sustainable development as nothing but an ingenious strategy to maintain Western hegemony over Third World economies; this Western countries allegedly do to sustain their ever increasing appetites for cheap raw materials (see for example Mafeje 2002).

Nevertheless, the politics of sustainable development, important or exciting as it may be, is not the main focus of the present paper. The brief discussion in this section serves to illustrate how multifaceted and controversial the issue of sustainable development can be. Our main focus is the ethical basis of sustainable development, which is examined in the following section.

Sustainable Development as an Ethical Imperative

The preceding sections point, albeit implicitly, to the ethical dimension of sustainable development. In this section we argue that in fact the ideal of sustainable development is founded on ethical considerations. More specifically, this section endeavours to reflect on the ethical foundations of sustainable development. To set the discourse in motion is the Brundtland Report, which strikes a moral chord when it asserts:

Our global future depends upon sustainable development; it depends upon our willingness and ability to dedicate our intelligence, ingenuity and adaptability and our energy to our common future. There is a choice we can make (WCED 1987).

In our view, “there is a choice we can make” is a moral call predicated on the special human capabilities and sensibilities, foremost among which are rationality and moral consciousness.

It is a call on humans to exercise these unique capabilities to evaluate their activities insofar as they have an impact on the entire ecosystem. More specifically, it is an appeal to all human beings as moral agents to make a positive difference, not merely informed by human convenience, but by what is the morally right thing to do. In addition, the idea of “our common future” is an implicit recognition of the inter-connectedness of all beings, and therefore an affirmation of the intrinsic worth of the natural environment. Consequently, the goal of sustainability can only be attained if societies accept to take responsibility for environmental problems rather than claim to be victims of the environmental crisis. Thus, as moral agents, humans have an obligation to secure “our common future”.

The ideal of sustainable development as a moral imperative is implicit in other important themes in the definitions of sustainable development earlier considered. Let us now examine some of these themes in some detail.

There is the theme of the obligation of the present generation to posterity. This is often appealed to by ethicists, particularly those with an anthropocentric persuasion, as a motivation for environmental conservation. Whether or not we in the present generation have a moral obligation to posterity, how far into the future this obligation, if any, extends, are legitimate philosophical questions that have ethical implications on the way we relate to our natural environment and on how we address issues of inter-generational equity and justice. However, like most philosophical issues, these questions remain contentious and elicit a wide range of responses.

Francis Bacon, the celebrated co-father of modern philosophy, asserts:

Men must pursue things which are just in present and leave the future to divine providence. What has not yet occurred cannot be legitimate object of our concern and care because for all we know, it may not occur at all (cited in Gower 1992, 2).

In similar light, Gower (1992, 3) quotes an unnamed American poet who, in reference to the question as to whether or not the present generation has an obligation to posterity, cynically comments: “...we beget them, we bear them, breed them and nurse them; what has posterity done for us?”

However, the cynical, even dismissive views above present only one side of the story. There are many contemporary philosophers who have advanced very strong arguments in support of our moral obligation to future generations. For example, Gower (1992, 8) advances an

argument based on the principle of equal consideration. For him, the principle of equal consideration is predicated on the principle of natural justice. In his considered view therefore, the moral importance of a person's interest has nothing to do with whether it is possible for that person to bargain with us. Rather, in keeping with natural justice, everyone, regardless of his or her circumstances, has a right to equal consideration. This argument strongly rebuts the cynics' position earlier outlined, which seems to predicate morality on the idea of reciprocity. The principle of natural justice is premised not on a reciprocal relationship between parties, but rather insists that certain benefits are due to persons by virtue of their very existence; that is, it emanates from the intrinsic worth of persons.

Besides, the duty of beneficence can be shown to ground our moral obligation to future generations. Beneficence is an important ethical principle which requires moral agents to contribute to the well-being of others (Shannon 1993, 7). Beneficence is premised on both the principles of reciprocity and fair play.

The principle of reciprocity, as already pointed out, obligates moral agents to give to others in return for the benefits they derive from them. Nevertheless, it may be argued that reciprocity cannot be the basis of morality, because it can easily degenerate into egoism which is antithetical to the true foundations of morality. In fact, beneficence understood as reciprocity would only obligate us to our predecessors, because we would be in a way paying back for the good we have received from them. Thus this principle would not obligate us to do what is good to future generations because as the American poet previously quoted asks, "what have they done for us?" This would not be in tandem with the call for sustainable development which must be anchored on how the present affects the future status of humanity and their natural environment - it is forward looking, not backward looking. The impetus behind sustainable development is not to dwell on the question as to what the previous generation has done, but rather on what impact the activities of the present generation have on the future: do they threaten the survival of the capacity of the natural environment such that the future generations will not be able to meet their own needs? The definition of sustainability in the Brundtland Report earlier cited articulates this futuristic focus.

The other dimension of the duty of beneficence, that is, the principle of fair play, obligates moral agents to extend equal consideration to the well-being of others and to their own. Thus moral agents ought to evaluate their actions in the light of benefits and burdens vis-à-vis

others, present and future. We ought to ask ourselves whether or not our actions promote the good of all, not only our own good.

Thus according to the principle of beneficence, we have a duty to future generations insofar as our present actions have implications on their well-being. This brings me to the next point of consideration, namely, that sustainable development is grounded on the supreme ethical principle of justice.

From the definitions of sustainable development earlier discussed, we can infer that there is a relationship between the idea of sustainability and the principle of justice. Achterberg (1994) has referred to this as the intuitive idea of justice. According to Achterberg (1994, 152), this intuitive sense of justice is expressed in the principle that “we should not hand the world we have exploited to our successors in a substantially worse shape than we have received it.” This principle is also well articulated in the Brundtland Report, and is central to its definition of sustainable development. This sense of justice can be discerned at two levels as implied in the definition of sustainable development by the Brundtland Report cited earlier on in this section.

First, we have justice between the present and future generations of human beings. The preceding discussion has emphasized the point that the present generation has moral obligations to future generations. That argument having been sufficiently dealt with, the issue being raised here is that of inter-generational justice. In our view, the question of inter-generational justice rests on the twin principles of equal opportunity and fair play. The destruction of the natural environment by the present generation severely violates the principle of justice in that it jeopardizes possibilities of equal opportunities and fair play for future generations.

Second, we can infer an underlying sense of justice that ought to be extended to the natural environment by human moral agents. This is implicit in the idea of ecological harmony articulated in the definitions by IUCN discussed earlier on in this section. In the words of Achterberg (1994, 154), this sense of justice is engendered in the idea that “nature as well must have opportunities to survive (integrity) in its diversity, characteristic of the biosphere”. However, there are controversies around this view; for it raises the perennial philosophical question concerning nature’s intrinsic value. This question is at the core of the shallow ecology-deep ecology debate. In a nutshell, these two positions represent a major theoretical divide in the discourse on environmental ethics. On the one hand, the core of shallow ecology

is the view that only humans have intrinsic value and hence deserve moral consideration. According to this position, the worth of other beings in nature is predicated on human worth. Some of the key proponents of shallow ecology are John Passmore (1974) and Robin Attfield (1991). On the other hand, deep ecology represents the view that all beings in nature have intrinsic value that is independent of their relationship to humans, and hence advocates for a paradigm shift from human-centred to nature-centred ethics. Among the key proponents of deep ecology are Paul Taylor (1989) and Rolston Holmes III (1992).

It is not within the scope of this paper to delve into the intricate and controversial question of whether or not the natural environment has intrinsic value as debated vigorously by environmentalists of shallow and deep ecology persuasions. However, it must be noted that Achterberg's position on the concept of intuitive justice owed to nature by human moral agents as articulated above (Achterberg 1994, 58) can be interpreted to rest on the view which regards nature to have intrinsic worth. We find the position of Rolston Holmes III (1992) to be one of the most convincing arguments for nature's intrinsic value. We summarise this position below simply to bolster Achterberg's position referred to above. Holmes III (1992, 137-138), in articulating the foundation of the view that nature has intrinsic value, explains:

An organism is a spontaneous self-emanating system, sustaining itself and reproducing itself, executing its programme, making a way through the world ... the organism is an ecological, evaluative system; so that it grows, reproduces, repairs its wounds and resists death ... The physical state the organism seeks, idealized in its programmatic form is a valued state; value is present in this achievement (Holmes III 1992, 137-138).

In our view, in this characterization, a strong case is made that every being in nature has value of its own, embodied in its very being. This idea is in fact present in Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics in the concept of "ontological goodness", which is said to be present in all beings in nature, although for both Aristotle and Aquinas possession of ontological goodness does not mean having intrinsic moral standing, as both denied non-human beings such standing. We however hold, in line with Holmes III's position above, that moral standing for nature ought to be predicated on its ontological goodness, implying thereby that humans owe direct moral consideration to the natural environment. The arguments on the intrinsic worth of the natural environment form the basis of the deep ecology environmental ethics paradigm. This perspective finds substantial support from non-Western cultures, particularly African and Eastern ones, that not only recognise the intrinsic worth of non-human beings, but also present an ontology which emphasizes human-nature connectedness (See Tempels 1945; Mbiti 1969).

Back to the point then: we argue with Achterberg (1994, 154) that the ideal of sustainability implies that we are duty bound to treat the natural environment justly. However, it must be clarified that this sense of justice cannot be based on the principle of reciprocity. Rather, as Achterberg explains, it is “justice done to nature by giving or leaving it an opportunity to an independent existence and development of its own just as we appropriately do justice to other entities of which we recognise their intrinsic (inherent) worth”. The issue of reciprocity has already been sufficiently dealt with in earlier pages of this section.

Finally, sustainability as a moral principle is implicit in the idea of improving the quality of life while maintaining ecological harmony. This is an affirmation of the interrelatedness of environmental issues with socio-economic questions such as equity in the distribution of resources, so that those responsible for developmental processes ought to take this fact into consideration. The UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) was born out of the recognition of the moral obligation that governments and communities have to create such conditions as to secure the dignity and quality of human life, both of which can only be achieved if the natural environment is maintained to a standard that ensures its continued capacity to meet human needs.

The Vision of Eco-sustainability

As we draw towards the end of this paper, we wish to outline what we believe to be the vision of sustainable development. As articulated in the foregoing pages, sustainable development as a moral imperative rests on the ideal of a new way of living. However, the realization of this vision depends on our rational acceptance of not only our limitations as human beings, but also the imperative for us to make certain sacrifices for the good of humankind and that of the natural environment. The words of the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) come alive here to remind us that there is a “choice we can make”: that choice is between destroying the natural environment and by extension humanity on the one hand, and on the other, conserving the natural environment and saving humanity from destruction. There is no other alternative.

In practical terms, the realization of this vision of sustainable development demands radical changes in our attitudes with regard to our treatment of the natural environment. At the very minimum, it requires moderation in our consumption habits. This imperative is premised on the understanding that sustainable fulfilment of human needs is inextricably bound up with sustainability of ecological balance; hence the natural environment provides the material

context within which human needs are fulfilled. Towards this end, however, socio-economic issues such as poverty alleviation, fair distribution of resources and related concerns must be addressed insofar as they militate against the realization of the ideal of sustainable development. As pointed out at the outset of this paper, the realization of sustainable development will remain elusive as long as more than 50% of the populations of the Third World live below the poverty line.

The words of Joy Palmer(1992, 182) adequately sum up the vision of sustainable development: “it calls for collective responsibility for our earth, today and for the future ... such a cooperative spirit may highlight the importance of a shared ethic of sustainability, and its contribution of deepening of our understanding of the role of human life.” In brief, sustainable development calls for an ethic of care for others, both humans and the natural environment. This is the true meaning of being human.

Conclusion

As discussed in the foregoing paragraphs, the ethic of eco-sustainability rests on three cardinal themes:

1. The recognition of the present generation’s moral obligation to posterity, hence the idea of intergenerational justice.
2. The recognition of the inherent value of nature and hence of its intrinsic moral standing.
3. Respect of and care for nature ought to inform responsible use of natural resources by humans.

Within this framework, we have endeavoured to show that in relation to the natural environment, humans ought to rise to a higher pedestal of wisdom and moral consciousness. This should then be reflected in better treatment of the natural environment, manifested in human activities harmonised with nature’s rhythms.

Thus in our view, the vision of ecosustainability culminates in a clarion call to humanity to remember the simple wisdom that if nature is good today, it would be better if it were to last forever. In praxis, ecosustainability requires a change in human attitude towards nature, rethinking our consumption habits, re-evaluating our value systems and, most importantly, re-assessing our distribution of resources to deal with problems of inequalities and poverty.

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