

„SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT” IS UNSUSTAINABLE !

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ABSTRACT

Any quantitative semantic analysis of contemporary economic and ecological literature would prove that the syntagm „sustainable development” is one of the most frequently used. However, that syntagm is not sustainable, neither semantically nor conceptually! Semantically – it is so vague since it does not tell us the development of what and the sustainability by what. A correct syntagm would be e.g. „ecologically sustainable economic development”. As in reality everything depends on everything, even that semantically correct syntagm is conceptually not sustainable and should be replaced by another one such as e.g. integral development. Sustainability cannot be measured, but the degree of integral development, i.e. quality of life, could be.

Key words: UN, sustainable development, semantic, conceptual, unsustainable, social and societal, integral or total development, national interest, white books, strategies, quality of life.

Introduction

Every new quantitative semantic analysis of mass media and scientific literature in economics and ecology, and lately, in the field of sociology, political science and international law, has shown that „sustainable development” has become one of the most frequently used syntagms. Moreover, like mushrooms after the rain: organisations, research institutes, centres or departments in the state administration are being established getting this syntagm in their names. Regardless of the main topic, there is almost no international conference where „sustainable development” is not mentioned, at least in some digression! Obviously, people have become universally conscious that for some reason „development” can become „unsustainable”! And while there prevails a consensus that development implies „economic development” (what is, of course, wrong and is most often reduced to economic growth, what is wrong, too) there are very different opinions on the factors that make that „economic development” sustainable or unsustainable. Therefore, the following relevant questions are being asked: is the syntagm „sustainable development” sustainable, both

semantically and conceptually, should it be abandoned, and what should replace it ?

Origins of the term „sustainable development” and its evolution

It seems that the syntagm „sustainable development” was for the first time used in the study „World Conservation Strategy” that was published in 1980 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, with particular emphasis on the relationship between „development” and the environment. The concept was widely accepted after the World Commission on Environment and Development, the so-called „Bruntland Commission”, that was established by UN, adopted the term „sustainable development” in the report „Our Common Future”, which was published in 1987 and defined it as „development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.¹ This was a rather imprecise definition, but it was adopted as such. Therefore, often, but not always, explicitly or tacitly, „sustainable development” has been implying „ecologically in a long run sustainable economic development ”.

The essence of this definition is the appeal to the generation of that time to show solidarity with the future generations in its attitude towards the environment. However, this appeal was nothing new. As early as in 1972 it had been made by the Club of Rome in its study „The Limits to Growth” (written by D.H. Meadows and others). Also, the study elaborated by the Hammarskjöld Foundation contained similar messages and it was published at that time under the title „What now ?”. Moreover, also in the early 1970s, a notable book „The Political Economy of the Disrupted Environment”² appeared and it was authored by the most famous Japanese economist Tsuru Shigeto. It contained an in-depth analysis of the causes of the environmental crisis of that time and its interdependence with the past models of economic growth. However, as early as in 1971 The Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, warned its readers pointing to the dramatic disruption of the environment in Japan and the growing consciousness on the need to re-orient national strategy from the „resource consuming economy” to a „resources preserving and restoring one”, what actually meant that

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¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/sustainable/welcome/index.en.html>.

² Tsuru Shigeto, *Kogai no seiji keizaigaku*, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1972.

Japan should re-orient its industrial structure from the „material-consuming” to a „knowledge-intensive” one.³

Actually, people had been aware that the irresponsible attitude towards the environment could jeopardise, not only economic development, but the very biological survival of some peoples and civilisations even several thousand years ago both on the north African coast and on the Easter Islands in the Pacific. However, for various reasons, the awareness that resulted from their experience disappeared together with those peoples and civilisations. The archaeological findings and their contemporary studies prove such a thesis.

The next stage in the evolution of the conception „sustainable development” was the opinion of numerous authors who thought that economic development could be or could become unsustainable, not only for economic or environmental reasons, but also for „social” ones. This broader conception was also adopted by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development that in one of its papers published in 2001 advocated the viewpoint that all countries should adopt the strategies of sustainable development with the aim to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the environment and the natural resources base for the future generations.⁴ Such socially responsible economic development meant economic progress made sustainable by social equity, health and education development, personal security, demographic development, economy, environment and institutions.⁵ It has been actually considered that the deterioration of problems in each of the above mentioned fields could jeopardise economic development or make it unsustainable. One can wonder whether all these fields can be called „social” and whether the notion „social” can be reduced to the fields mentioned above since social and societal are not synonyms.

The fact that the growth of economic wealth and economic development can be induced or obstructed by non-economic factors, particularly by social and societal ones, was noticed a long time ago by some famous economists, such as are : Antonio Serra (16++-17++), Robert Malthus (1766-1834) and especially: John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Max

³ IMPP, Godišnjak 1971, p. 731.

⁴ UN, Indicators of Sustainable Development, New York 2001, p. 59.

⁵ Ibid., pp.30-31.

Weber (1864-1920), Thorsten Veblen (1857-1929), Joseph Schumpeter (1883-1950), Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987) and others.

The latest step in building up the conception of „sustainable development” was made by international law experts. Considering that the lack of respect for the law could jeopardise economic development, during the preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development which took place in Johannesburg in 2002, International law Association representatives upheld the idea that the key components of „sustainable development” should be: a) poverty eradication, b) environmental conservation and c) respect for human rights.⁶ Thus, the conception of „sustainable development” has evolved into „ecologically; socially and by respect for human rights sustainable economic development” .

At the summit in Johannesburg, there were as many conceptions of „sustainable development” as there were those who took the floor at the conference. This is in a way understandable since everyone spoke on the experiences of his own country and its successes and problems in this field. Therefore, it was natural that, for example, the representative of Japan advocated the conception that „the keys to sustainable development are the investment in human resources and co-operation in spreading knowledge and technology”.

„Sustainable development” is unsustainable!

Thus, it is obvious that the vagueness of the conception „sustainable development”, its continuing evolution, as well as its various comprehensions and its too frequent use and abuse has created a great confusion and made it, both semantically and conceptually, more unsustainable than at the time it was invented.

Considering it from the purely semantic aspect, the syntagm „sustainable development” is unsustainable for at least two big reasons.

First, regardless of what we think that development in general is – the process of desirable quantitative as well as qualitative changes, or, the process of a whole becoming, structurally and functionally, more complex

⁶ Key note speech by Professor Nico Schrijver, on behalf of the International Law Association, at Round Table World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 29 August 2002.

than earlier – a question is posed: development of what ? Almost everything can develop or regress: economy, information, science, art, sport, philosophy and bookkeeping! Why should development necessarily imply economic development? Therefore, in order to avoid ambiguities the word „development” should be determined by an attribute by saying what particular development is in question.

Second, one can also wonder what makes or for what reason some development is unsustainable, since it can be unsustainable not for one, but for several various reasons! For example, economic development can be unsustainable for security (war, crime, disturbance of law and order), political (government paralysis, wrong government priorities), scientific (wrong strategies of overall and economic development, in particular), educational (high illiteracy of the people) social (a great number of poor people), health (spreading of a disease), technological, environmental, ideological and many other reasons. Or, scientific development can be unsustainable for religious, educational, financial or political reasons; health development can become unsustainable for environmental, social (abolishment of free health care), economic (malnutrition or lack of clean water) and other reasons.. Apart from this situation, where a development is sustainable or unsustainable for one or more factors, it can become or be sustainable for some factors and unsustainable for some other ones. In that case, a stronger factor or a stronger combination of factors, acting in the same direction, will make a development sustainable or unsustainable.

These semantic problems („development of what” and „because of what”) result in the conceptual wrongfulness of the syntagm „sustainable development”. Since, there is no such thing as an abstract development, but there is always development or regress of a field, some fields or all fields! Therefore, looking from the purely semantic aspect, the only sustainable syntagm is the one that precisely denotes the development it refers to, and what makes it sustainable as is e.g. „educationally, technologically, environmentally, socially and morally sustainable economic development” or „religiously sustainable scientific development” or „politically sustainable artistic development” (it is present where the freedom of creative work is cherished), etc.

Although being more useful than the syntagms that are one or two-fold inaccurate, these semantically accurate syntagms are yet conceptually unsustainable. This is because in real life everything depends on everything,

more on something and less on something else, in some cases, it depends directly and in some others indirectly. For this reason, the only comprehensive and sustainable in a long run, or, actually a correct approach to the problem of development in any field is a holistic one. Thus, a completely sustainable development of a field, in a long run, is just the one to which all other developments are helpful i.e. integral development or a superior combination of various developments. True, in a short as well as in a long run there are always very important and less important factors of the given development.

Integral development

Integral (total, whole, entire, complete, allsided, general, comprehensive) development is the process of desirable or positive quantitative and qualitative (structural) changes in all fields and for all subjects. It is, actually, the process of realization of all values of the given country (as a whole as well as of its parts represented by individuals and social groups) together with values of the international community.

Thus, integral development includes developments in the fields of: external security, internal security, political life, health, environment, economy, education, science, technology, information, mass media, demography, philosophy, moral, religion, culture, art, social, legal, administrative and judicial , space (urban) sphere, sports, entertainment, recreation, fashion and other internal fields, as well as development of international relations within these and all other fields, too.

All these developments should be in a positive correlation (development in one field stimulates development in others), they are continually related to each other and there is an interaction between them. Every development is important, but what development in a given country will be of key (but not of exclusive) importance depends on the circumstances within the country and on its surroundings. When independence is jeopardised in a country its foreign security becomes the most important, when it falls into a crisis then it becomes clear how significant politics is, when it faces poverty it is realised how important economic development is, when we get sick we realise that our health is the most important, when the environment and health are seriously endangered we see how important is to preserve them or how significant ecology is, when we see that the standard of living, military

power and many other things depend so much on the level of technological development, we realise how technology is important, etc.

Since some values are universal and some others particular, sometimes development implies changes in one direction while sometimes it goes in the quite opposite one.

For example, health is a universal and fundamental value of every man. Therefore, health development has everywhere similar meaning and is desirable everywhere (with the exception of some doctor who would want to keep his job). In the same way, in almost all countries, economic growth implies growth of production of goods and services which are lacking or are insufficient, and it is therefore, desirable. True, there is also undesirable economic growth, and this is the case when the production of unnecessary or harmful goods and services grows.

However, demographic development in some countries (underpopulated, but rich in natural resources) implies and demands faster growth of population, while in some others (overpopulated, but lacking in natural resources) it demands fall, stagnation or slower growth of population. The similar situation is with foreign security or military development. Unfortunately, there is no doubt that in the present world strengthening of armed forces in the countries that are exposed to the external threats and are militarily weak is a necessity and consequently, it is one the elements of foreign security development (other elements are as follows: statesmanship in foreign policy, co-operation with neighbours, membership in international organisations, etc.). However, military strengthening of super powers is a security anti-development since from the moment a country gets second-strike capacity in the case of a nuclear attack (what has prevented launching of the first strike so far) any further military strengthening of super powers only reduces their security as well as the security of the world as a whole.

However, there are cases when it is rather difficult to determine whether some processes are a development or anti-development. Thus, e.g. the question is posed: would in the process of transition from statist to market societies the introduction of solely market mechanisms in the fields such as health care and education be a development or anti-development. In this case, people could die, intelligent and talented people would not be able to go on with their studies because they could not afford to pay the costs of their medical treatment or studying. Also, highly relevant question is: what

kind of market economy, instead of statist one, should be preferable: capitalist (with domination of private ownership) or personalist (with domination of personal ownership i.e. the ownership of the employees) ?

Indicators of the level of integral development

The vagueness of the conception „sustainable development” and big differences in its conceiving have deflected any attempt to find an accurate indicator of the degree of „sustainability” or „unsustainability” of economic or any other development. However, for integral development there is already proper term and it is „quality of life”. True, instead of this one the term „welfare” was earlier used. However, it is value-loaded term and optimistically coloured. For this reason, it is rather inappropriate, particularly for expressing the level of overall development in the least developed countries. It would be hypocritical to speak of „welfare” in Sierra Leone, Niger or Burkina Faso, but we can talk of the „quality of life” in these countries as well as in Norway, Switzerland or Canada.

So far, there have been several attempts to define and measure the „quality of life”. However, they have given only partial results because the conceptions of development in some fields, and at least in one aspect, rest on the particular values, which are determined by ideology and culture. Defining all elements that the „quality of life” includes is much above the abilities of individuals and small teams of experts. This could be done only by a rather numerous team of experts in all fields and from all typical countries of the world.

According to our opinion, in defining the „quality of life” of a society and of an individual, as well, we must take as a starting point the fact that the man is a very complex and multidimensional being with many abilities, needs and wishes. He lives in a series of concentric social circles and the man is a man to the extent to which he is a creative and moral being. For this reason, we can define the „quality of life” in at least two ways.

First, it can be defined as the degree a society has attained in its integral, or total development, this actually implying development in all fields. Second, it can be defined as the degree to which a society realizes all its values as

well as the values of groups and individuals that make it, and also values of the international community.

Economists are those who most often define and measure the „quality of life”. However, since the main task in measuring the „quality of life” is to determine the scale and specific weight of every individual value, the following question is posed: is not this primarily a job for philosophers – axiologists and professional statisticians? True, statisticians would have great difficulties since the „quality of life” of individuals and groups embraces a number of values whose accurate quantification is almost impossible to make, and they include: happiness, friendship, love, reputation, respect, tolerance, social harmony and others. However, those values can be appropriately rated.

However, all these difficulties should not be an obstacle for the adoption of the conception that growth of the „quality of life” should be a global objective of any rationally conceived policy, any conception of national interest and should be a key yardstick of measurement of performances of all societies. In the same way, the only true measure of the success in life of an individual could be his „quality of life”, or the degree to which he achieves all values that are relevant for him, as well as the universal ones.

Instead of a conclusion

Although being so often and eagerly used, the syntagm „sustainable development” is, however, unsustainable for semantic as well as for conceptual reasons. As such, it should be abandoned – in a semantic sense only partially and in a conceptual one – totally!

In a semantic sense, it should be supplemented in order to become accurate. It is always necessary to determine the development of what and by what or actually for what reasons a given development is sustainable or unsustainable. For example, it should be said „economically unsustainable health development” or „by health unsustainable economic development”, „morally and by health sustainable demographic development” or „technologically unsustainable environmental development”, etc. When it is precisely defined, there is no dilemma what development is in question and on what factor or factors it depends according to one’s opinion.

However, though these syntagms are semantically very accurate and sustainable they are conceptually wrong and unsustainable! Let us take, e.g. a very accurate syntagm „technologically unsustainable environmental development”. It is clear that the technologies that are applied in production damage the environment and that they should be changed! A question can be posed: why are they not changed. Is it for the absence of awareness on the harmfulness of the given technology or, perhaps, for a lack of some better technology, or, because a wish to maximise the profit by minimising the environmental protection costs, or, may be, for something else? The above mentioned syntagm does not show it ! It is obvious that the solution to the problem lies in integral development because it rests on the awareness that everything depends on everything, on the interaction and the positive correlation of all developments or, actually, development in all fields.

It is therefore, natural that the objective of any rationally organised society is its integral development. It is also natural that the objective of the state as the main institution of any politically organised society is the constant improvement of the quality of life of its citizens, or actually its integral development. Then it is normal that both, the society and the state, are organised in a way that serves the aim of achieving that objective.

Therefore, with the exception of moral, philosophical, fashion and entertainment developments it is desirable to establish separate administrative bodies that would be in charge of these developments and direct them rationally. These are usually ministries, and for some fields such as economy it is significant to establish ministries for all of its important branches. For some other fields however, smaller bodies can be established such as agencies, committees, directorates, bureaus, etc. As regards moral development, no special body should be established – it would be sufficient to introduce the subject Bon Ton in primary and History of Ethics in secondary schools. Concerning the religious development, apart from the establishment of the Ministry of Religions, the subject Science on Religions should replace Religious Instruction in secular schools. Religious schools should be maintained and separated from secular ones. The care for development of philosophy (the mother of all sciences) should be taken by secondary schools, universities and philosophers, while a significant financial support should be offered by government to associations of philosophers and the periodicals they publish. With no conscience-guilt, fashion and entertainment developments should be, yet, left to the market. It is important that the society takes care of the need to achieve development in

all fields, while the bodies in charge should be systematically established and organised adequately where they are needed.

In order to stimulate development in its field every state administrative body or organ should publish a white book on its subject early in each year. It should describe the situation and development in the previous year in the field it is in charge of. In accordance with actual situation in the country and the world trends and in co-operation with experts in this field, state administration should make and continually correct its development strategies and policies. Taking into consideration the findings and proposals in all fields, the Parliament and the Government should propose the integral development strategies and policies in all fields with the aim to achieve, as quickly as possible, a better quality of life for all its citizens.

Summary

It seems that the syntagm „sustainable development” was at first used in the study „World Conservation Strategy” that was published in 1980 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, particularly pointing to the relationship between „development” and the environment. The concept was widely accepted after the World Commission on Environment and Development, the so-called „Brundtland Commission”, that was established by UN, adopted the term „sustainable development” in the report „Our Common Future”, which was published in 1987 and defined it as „development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The syntagm has remained the same while its conception has further changed. This has created a real confusion in its meaning!

Actually, the term „sustainable development” is unsustainable both from semantic and conceptual reasons. Considering it semantically, it is unsustainable first, because the term does not tell us the development of what and second, it does not tell us why or actually, what makes it sustainable. However, even when this conception is accurately formulated the syntagm is conceptually unsustainable, because everything depends on everything, only to a different degree, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Therefore, in a conceptual sense this syntagm should be replaced by another one such as integral or total development.

Integral development should imply developments of all fields, or the process of attaining all values (in accordance with their scale) of a country, this including all social groups and individuals that make it, as well as the values of the international community. Unlike „sustainable development” that, due to its vagueness, cannot have its indicators, integral development has it in the form of the „quality of life”.

A higher „quality of life” is therefore the broadest rational objective a society, its groups and its individuals should strive to, and the means by which it could be attained is not „sustainable development” but integral one.