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Why 'Sustainable Development' is Often Neither: a Constructive Critique

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Abstract: Efforts and programs toward aiding sustainable development in less affluent countries are primarily driven by the moral imperative to relieve and to prevent suffering. This utilitarian principle has provided the moral basis for humanitarian intervention and development aid initiatives worldwide for the past decades. It takes a short term perspective which shapes the initiatives in characteristic ways. While most development aid programs succeed in their goals to relieve hunger and poverty in ad hoc situations, their success in the long term seems increasingly questionable, which throws doubt on the claims that such efforts qualify as sustainable development. This paper aims to test such shortfall and to find some explanations for it. We assessed the economic development in the world's ten least affluent countries by comparing their ecological footprints with their biocapacities. This ratio, and how it changes over time, indicates how sustainable the development of a country or region is, and whether it risks ecological overshoot. Our results confirm our earlier findings on South-East Asia, namely that poor countries tend to have the advantage of greater sustainability. We also examined the impact that the major development aid programs in those countries are likely to have on the ratio of footprint over capacity. Most development aid tends to increase that ratio, by boosting footprints without adequately increasing biocapacity. One conceptual explanation for this shortfall on sustainability lies in the Conventional Development Paradigm, an ideological construct that provides the rationales for most development aid programs. According to the literature, it rests on unjustified assumptions about economic growth and on the externalisation of losses in natural capital. It also rests on a simplistic

version of utilitarianism, usually summed up in the principle of 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. We suggest that a more realistic interpretation of sustainability necessitates a revision of that principle to ' the minimum acceptable amount of good for the greatest sustainable number'. Under that perspective, promoting the transition to sustainability becomes a sine qua non condition for any form of 'development'.

Keywords: Sustainable development; conventional development paradigm; utilitarianism.

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1. Introduction

Following the dominant convention in the literature, we define development as multidimensional innovation or growth that achieves positive outcomes for the quality of human lives and/or for human security. It can manifest in the areas of financial income, employment, distribution of wealth, education, political autonomy, basic needs for survival, health of populations and ecosystems, equality, self-esteem and dignity, and freedom [1]. The latter includes Sen's [2] standard of individual capability. Those areas cover people's social, biological, and economic environments and have been recognised as the main indicators contributing to the human development index [3] and human security index [4]. Sustainable development, then, includes any such innovation or growth that does not compromise the ability of future generations to develop along the same lines [5: 2]. This corresponds to the definition by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), "improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems" [6: 6]. Thus, sustainability is all about avoiding to transgress systemic limits.

The above listed areas in which development can manifest suggest directly some ethical reasons why affluent countries engage in international development aid: When the citizens of a poor country suffer deprivations in those areas, and their own government and communities are not in a position to alleviate their situation, international aid seems indicated for several moral reasons. One of those reasons, though rarely explicated, is self interest. Helping a country develop into a valuable trading partner and enabling that country to purchase goods and services from the donor country (so-called tied aid) are in the obvious national self interest of the donor. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness [7] paved the way for development aid to become untied, broadly coordinated among donors, and designed and implemented by the recipient countries. But oftentimes political and strategic considerations still dominate the allocation decisions [8].

Much more widely advertised is the utilitarian motivation, under which helping a sufficiently large group of people transcend a situation that caused them to suffer inordinate deprivations, at only minor sacrifice to the donor, provides the necessary and sufficient justification for aid. Likewise, deontological and virtue-based ethics recognise a duty to relieve suffering, often manifesting in the mission statements of charitable organisations both religious and secular. Arguments in support of that duty often invoke human rights and basic needs. In practice, such humanitarian motives tend to concentrate on situations where the deprivation is most easily quantified, as in cases where populations experience extreme poverty, unemployment, under-education, poor health, or homelessness.

The basic and widely shared agreement underlying these ethical motives is that knowledge of human suffering is connected with a duty to actively help. Much less general agreement is found when

it comes to choosing the most appropriate ways to help. Short term relief measures dominate in cases of natural disasters such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake which displaced about 2.3 million Haitians (almost one quarter of the total population) and killed or injured over half a million. The UN's relief program focuses on the restoration of the island's economy and public health [9].

Designed as immediate disaster relief, it largely ignores how the physical limitations in the island's climate, soil conditions, environmental trends, and population dynamics affect its long term prospects for development. Those issues are considered beyond the program's time horizon and beyond its goals of providing immediate relief. In other words, international disaster relief is seldom justified by arguments invoking sustainability, nor would many suggest that it needs to be. This sets it apart from international development aid where the absence of a long-term focus can raise considerable problems, as we will explain presently.

2. Disaster Relief and Development Aid

The short term humanitarian priorities in disaster relief often seem relatively straightforward, suggesting unequivocally not only the need for immediate action but also what choices of aid measures might be indicated. Yet, as soon as the time frame is extended to the medium and long term, those choices become more debatable. This is most evident in cases of famine relief. For example, Peter Singer [10] considers the relief of human suffering to be a paramount moral duty; he argued that a famine always demands immediate food aid from any who are reasonably able. Arguing on the same humanitarian and utilitarian grounds, Garret Hardin [11] comes to the opposite conclusion, that famine relief in the form of food donations would be the worst anybody could do to a poor country. Because it promotes population growth without addressing the reasons for the famine, it will only cause worse famines in years to come. Both Singer and Hardin agree that family planning and contraception programs must be included in any such relief program. Curiously, neither author engages with deontological or virtue-based rationales for aid, which emphasise the charitable act as a duty independent of consequentialist considerations.

The difference between the two positions lies of course in the time frame and the preferred balance between the strategies of short-term alleviation versus long-term prevention. As it turns out, Singer's view usually carries the day with many relief programs, except that family planning is seldom included as an integral part.[1] That omission again underscores the short term perspective taken by such programs. Yet the potential conflict between the two strategies points to an ethical dilemma. One wonders just how severe the suffering and misery must be before we ought to ignore potential long-term complications, or how disastrous the long-term consequences of the relief action must be to justify the withholding of aid.

In the case of disaster relief we see no room for justifiable compromise; its concerns lie by definition in the short term, amounting to moral blinkers. The challenge of finding appropriate compromises becomes much more pressing where it regards programs for development aid which

[1] The US have for most fof the past decades pursued a policy of refusing to fund any programs that include birth control measures of any kind in Third World countries [12]. This amounted to cancelling all US development aid, as well as US participation in international aid, that was in any way associated with family planning. At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo the goal of fertility reduction was dismissed in favour of women's empowerment. Instrumental in this outcome were the international women's movement, the US government, and the Holy See [13]. A reference to reproductive rights was deleted from the Rio+20 report.

pursue explicit aims that extend into the medium and long term future. We would expect such programs to be guided primarily by considerations of long term benefits which would logically include sustainability if the time horizon is not specified. Thus, as long as the goals of a development program are not delimited in time, that development is automatically governed by the constraints that define sustainable development. Conversely, a program or initiative that promotes evidently unsustainable end states should come with clear temporal demarcations and disclaimers abrogating any responsibility for consequences that might ensue beyond those dates. We base those expectations on the ideals of beneficence and veracity that inform the professional codes of conduct of development workers and academics. In this study we examined to what extent major development programs live up to those expectations.

3. Method

Among the many programs at the national and international levels that all share the label of sustainable development, international development aid tends to benefit from a supranational perspective and a grounding in scientific analyses of needs and potentials. Rather than attempting to gauge the successes of individual programs we chose to examine the cumulative and synergistic outcomes occurring in their preferred recipients, the world's poorest developing countries. We selected our sample countries on the basis of their rankings on the Human Development Index [3] and the Human Security Index [4]. Countries that scored low on both indices are not only the most likely recipients of development aid, in many cases they represent situations that render development fundamentally imperative on humanitarian grounds. Development in this case is hardly a whimsical option but the only defensible course of action. Yet, unlike disaster relief, these programs explicitly pursue long-term goals. The question is, what shape do their strategies take, stopgap or long term?

In order to maximise the chances of those development efforts to achieve their objectives we excluded from our sample of poorest countries any that showed a failed states index (FSI) greater than 100, which includes the top thirteen [14]. Failing states are unlikely to provide the minimum requirements of infrastructure and political stability for successful development. In other words, they need more than the average kind of development aid, ranging from peace keeping to broad social reform and are often supported by armed intervention.

A program for sustainable development based on a genuine long term perspective would seek either to ensure the sustainable flourishing of the economy and of human well-being, or to pave the way for a smooth transition towards more sustainable structures and practices. The extent to which a country operates sustainably can be estimated by comparing its citizens' average ecological footprint (reflecting its demand of resources and its ecological impact) with the amount of biocapacity available for each citizen (reflecting its resources and ecosystem services, also referred to as natural capital) [15, 16, 17]. Based on a previous report [18] we use the country's sustainability quotient or SQ - the ratio of per capita ecological footprint over its available per capita biocapacity.[2] An SQ of less than 1 indicates sustainability while greater than one indicates ecological overshoot. The data are summarised in Table 1.

[2] Whether a country has incurred an ecological deficit or a surplus can also be determined by subtracting the footprint from the biocapacity [19]. However, the resulting differences are less commensurable in terms of development status of different countries than are quotients.

To assess the development of the sample countries for its sustainability we identified a major development aid program for each country, verified that it explicitly named sustainable development among its aims, and examined its major strategies for their effects on the country's biocapacity factors (bioproductive area and bioproductivity) and on its ecological footprint drivers (population growth, consumption of goods and services per person, footprint intensity) [19: 41]. The sum of those effects would cause its SQ to either rise or fall. The trend by which the SQ changes over time indicates how sustainable the development of a country or region is, and whether the risk of ecological overshoot is increasing or decreasing. Where possible we selected grant programs over loan programs. The findings are summarised in Table 2.

4. Finding: 'Sustainable Development' is Often Neither

Table 1 lists the state of sustainability in twelve of the world's poorest countries, compared to the EU and the world average. The distribution of SQ values shows six countries operating sustainably - i.e. drawing only on the interest from their natural capital. The other six have exceeded their sustainable limit and are drawing on both principal and interest. Yet only four of those SQ values match the world average, and none of them comes close to the kind of overshoot exemplified by the European average of 2.2 (2003) or the US value of 2.1 (2007) [20].

The data confirm our earlier findings on South-East Asian countries [18], as well as global surveys [20], namely that poor countries tend to have the advantage of greater sustainability except in cases of excessive population size. In those cases ecological overshoot occurs in spite of small footprints because the biocapacity resources are shared among too large a population, resulting in rampant poverty, often aggravated by post-colonial legacies of inequitable power structures and mismanagement. Those examples (in our sample, Burundi, Rwanda and Togo, and to a lesser extent Ethiopia) show that the SQ says nothing about a country's level of development; it only indicates how sustainably it operates.

In contrast to those high SQ countries, many developing countries with smaller populations show considerable potential to achieve the transition to a sustainable economy, aided by the fact that their natural capital has not yet been greatly reduced [19]. In our sample, those would be Niger and Burkina Faso. Suitable development aid could provide crucial support at the right time to make that transition possible before further population growth removes it beyond the horizon.

The remaining countries in our sample (Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone) show SQ values below 1.0, indicating that they are conducting their affairs sustainably for the time being. This encouraging finding needs to be evaluated in the light of the abject poverty that abounds in all of them. This means that the state of sustainability represents only one of several necessary conditions for human security and well-being. Moreover, the low SQ does not necessarily indicate that the country has more resources to offer those poor multitudes; more likely its excess productivity is exported abroad to support other countries' overshoot. Yet, the low SQ also indicates a significant opportunity for development aid – the chance that with the right kind of support those countries could remain sustainable while still relieving their poverty. The question is, are they likely to receive such support?

This leads to the problem posed by the dynamics of the situation. The SQ values in Table 1 only provide snapshots in time; they say nothing about the directions in which those countries are

developing. An indication about probable changes for each country is given by its major source of development aid. Table 2 lists one major donor program for each country in the sample, along with their stated goals and the resulting ramifications on footprints and biocapacities. The data suggest a slim chance for an affirmative answer to the question raised in the preceding paragraph. Even considering that each country receives aid from multiple other donors, the data indicate that these particular donors have not fully understood the challenge. Even more concerning is the fact that if development aid tends to fail those sustainable countries by not preventing them from slipping into overshoot, it is even less likely to succeed in the cases of unsustainable countries in helping them reduce it. This reinforces critiques that point to widespread failures of development aid in areas other than sustainability [21].

Table 1. Twelve of the world's poorest countries are compared to the European Union and the world average in their extent of sustainability. Example: Each citizen of Eritrea uses the equivalent of 0.9 global hectares to sustain their livelihood; the country of Eritrea has 1.6 global hectares of bioproductive land to offer to each citizen; this results in an SQ of 0.563, meaning that Eritreans live within the carrying capacity of their land. Sources: [19, 20]

Country	**Ecol FP [gha per person]**	**Biocapacity [gha per person]**	**SQ**	**HDI ranking Max=187**	**HSI ranking Max=232**
Burkina Faso	1.3	1.3	1.0	181	210
Burundi	0.9	0.5	1.8	185	225
Eritrea	0.9	1.6	0.563	177	218
Ethiopia	1.1	0.7	1.571	174	221
Guinea-Bissau	1.0	3.2	0.31	176	208
Liberia	1.3	2.5	0.52	182	229
Mali	1.9	2.5	0.76	175	200
Mozambique	0.8	1.9	0.421	184	198
Niger	2.3	2.1	1.10	186	222
Rwanda	1.0	0.6	1.67	166	220
Sierra Leone	1.1	1.2	0.92	180	224
Togo	1.0	0.6	1.67	162	219
European Union (27)	2.7 – 8.3 Eur. Av. 4.8	1.0 – 12.5 Eur. Av. 2.2	0.494-6.023 Eur. Av. 2.2	3 - 55	2 - 71
World	2.7	1.8	1.5	1 - 187	1 - 232