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# Conceptualization of Sustainable Human Development in the Context of Bangladesh

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***Abstract :*** *This paper on Conceptualization of Sustainable Human Development (SHD) describes in brief, the response of Bangladesh to the problem of achieving sustainable human development in the 1990s in the context of (1) a conventional global effort towards prevention of environmental pollution and degradation and (2) a non- conventional approach of developing quantitative and qualitative human development indicators. As for the conventional approach, the paper shows that although the international perception in this area has been moving in the right direction, the desired progress has been slow primarily because the main actors (for environmental pollution and degradation) happens to be the more developed countries who are unwilling to implement the major recommendations most of which are against their economic interest. For a developing country like Bangladesh, therefore, the second approach, of moving towards identification of appropriate quantitative and qualitative indicators and implementing policy measures to implement these within the above constraints, has become more important. Initially, this approach was attempted in Bangladesh through a number of UN agencies led by the UNDP but soon the Government of Bangladesh identified its own preferred human development indicators both quantitative and qualitative. Further, Bangladesh found such initiative substantially consistent with its past planning efforts at the macro-level and more important, its political struggle towards restoration of democracy and moving towards good governance reinforced the above endeavour by throwing a number of innovative political indicators in the emergent political space in the 1990s. However, it remains to be seen whether the innovative home work done by the government of Bangladesh in the non-conventional approach through implementation of over due recommendations for prevention of global environmental pollution and degradation by the more developed countries without any further delay. One can only hope for the best.*

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## Introduction

This paper on "Conceptualization of Sustainable Human Development (SHD) in the context of Bangladesh" shows that the topic is being viewed in this country both in the background of conventional concern for protection and sustainability of global environment and from a somewhat non-"conventional" concern for more specific problems of human resources development in contemporary developing economics. At its initial stage, the conventional view (that sustainable human development primarily depends on environmental protection on global basis), was dominant. Subsequently, however, it was realized that the current environmental protection policies of the developed countries are not necessarily complementary to the interest of those of the developing countries and therefore, it might take a long time for a country like Bangladesh to get benefit from such an approach. As a result, it became necessary for policy makers at both international and national levels to find out what could be done in such developing countries in the immediate future that would protect environment and would promote substantial human development at the same time. Consequently, the non-conventional approach that gives more emphasis on sustainable human development gained momentum in the early 1990s. The most notable feature of this development has been the identification of a number of economic, social and political indicators for continuous monitoring and evaluation of progress in these fields. This approach is now being further developed and internalized in Bangladesh. More interestingly, in Bangladesh a number of parallel movements notably in the area of humanizing macro economic planning with an increased concern for holistic social development and a supportive democratic movement, have been reinforcing this development.

To understand the above development, this paper is divided into three main parts: in Part-I, the conventional approach to SHD mainly through sustainable environmental protection is priefly described with focus on its limitation particularly for the developing countries. In Part-II, the development of the new approach to SHD based on greater emphasis on identifiable human development indices mainly developed by UNDP is highlighted. In Part-III, the case of specific response of Bangladesh to such concept of human development in presented briefly in its historical context. This part is divided into three sub-heads such as:

(a) the early effort of Bangladesh for achieving SHD through its own variety of socialist reconstruction particularly in the macro-economic approach to development;
(b) the question of choice of human indicators for SHD development in Bangladesh within the framework of market economy thereafter and finally;
(c) the process of internalization of this new approach through development of a number of human freedom indicators in Bangladesh largely derived from its struggle for socio-political development that is giving new meaning to its future development.

In conclusion, however, it is pointed out that this development in the area of the non-conventional approach to SHD can at best be only a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. For sufficient condition the two approaches to development, the conventional approach to environmental protection and the non-conventional approach to SHD have to be synchronized through an increased concern on the part of the advanced countries for the welfare of the developing countries. This paper

finally raises the question if the world is now in a better position to move towards this synchronized approach with its renewed understanding of the value and precept of "sharing and caring" for global welfare as a whole. We do not have a ready-made answer to this question right now; we can only hope for the best. Let us first take up the case of conventional view on environmental protection and its implication for sustainable human development.

## Part-I: The Conventional View: Sustainable Human Development in the context of protection and sustainability of global environment

Over the last few decades, a number of definitions of Sustainable Human Development (SHD) seem to have emerged mainly at the initiative of the contemporary advanced countries, which are showing increasing concern for the welfare of the people at large mainly through environmental protection of our planet. This is understandable from the fact that having seriously damaged the ecological balance through unplanned development, the advanced countries seemed to have realized, at least to some extent, that they have to cooperate not only with each other but also with the poorer countries to preserve whatever ecological balance is now left. In this connection we may note that Robert Repetto[1] described the core of the idea of sustainability as "the concept that current decisions should not impair the prospect for maintaining or improving future living standards.... This implies that our economic system should be managed so that we live off the dividend of our resources, maintaining and improving the asset base.."

Brundtland Commission's wide-ranging discussion of sustainable development had also asserted that[2] ... "we come to see that a new development path was required, one that sustains human progress not just in a few places for a few years but for the entire planet into distant future. Thus "sustainable development becomes a goal not just for the developing nations, but for the industrial ones as well." The Commission further observed that [3] "economic growth and development obviously involve changes in the physical eco-system. Every eco-system everywhere cannot be preserved in tact" and therefore[4]. "a pursuit of sustainable development requires.. a production system that respects the obligation to preserve the ecological base for that environment".

The above definitions of sustainable development implicitly concluded that the concern for the sustainable human development in both the rich and the poor countries could be substantially solved through joint actions. However, the follow up actions in subsequent periods showed that the richer countries were likely to pursue environmental policies that would continue to greatly benefit the poorer countries.

The above concern brought the concept of development options for the poorer countries in the forefront and along with this came the question who should decide what type of economic growth is needed and for whom? An integrated approach to environmental protection could mean two basic options: the developed countries could try to develop joint actions along with the developing countries with better understanding of the problems of the latter, while keeping the initiative of such development in their own hands or they (the developed

countries) could agree that the poorer countries should from now on keep the initiative of development in their own hands. The search for this answer gives us the background for the development of the non-conventional approach to SHD with the emphasis on a new kind of policy prescription specific to the developing countries. This development is presented in brief in Part-II.

## Part-II: Conceptualization of non-conventional approach: Environment Protection through Sustainable Human Development.

To understand the implications of the new approach, we may note that, David Korten has pointed out in this connection that a failure to promote development options for the poorer countries could mean an accelerated move towards further disaster for the entire population of the world[5].

> "Two things of fundamental importance to each and every one of us are now much at stake.... Will people and communities control their local resources and economics and be able to set their own goals and priorities based on their own values and aspirations? Or will these decisions be left to global financial markets and corporations that are blind to all values save one instant financial return?"
>
> Further[6],
>
> "Will the life sustaining resources produced by regenerative capacities of our planet's ecosystems be equitably shared to provide for the material needs of all of us who inhibit this bountiful

> planet, as well as our children unto the seventh generation and beyond? or will we allow a global economic system that is now functioning on auto-pilot beyond conscious human control to consume and destroy the ecosystem and our social fabric in its insatiable quest for money?"

Such messages were reinforced by some other actors on the scene. The Annual Meeting of World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland around the same period, observed that[7]:

- Economic globalization is causing severe economic dislocation and social instability.
- The technological changes of the past few years have eliminated more jobs than they have created.
- The global competition "that is part and parcel of globalization leads to winner –take—all situations; those who come out on top win big, and the losers loss even bigger".
- Higher profits no longer mean more job security and better wages. "Globalization tends to de-link the fate of the corporation from the fate of its employees".
- Unless serious corrective action is taken soon, the backlash could turn into open political revolt that could destabilize the Western Democracies.

Along with the above disturbing observation came some opportunities to take lessons on development priorities from the less developed countries and people. One such lesson was[8] "that economics should be local rooting power in the people and communities who realize their wellbeing depends on the health and vitality of their local ecosystem". A more important

observation in this connection was that[9] "millions of people are also making an important discovery that life is about living not consuming. A life of material sufficiency can be filled with social, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual abundance that place no burden on the planet".

The new action agenda called for a more self-reliant and a more radical approach among like-minded communities emphasizing that[10] "it is time to assume responsibility creating a new human future of just and sustainable communities freed from the myth that greed, competition, and mindless consumption are paths to individual and collective fulfillment. It will take millions of people around the world--- linked together into powerful political coalition aimed at radical and economic reform to win the war that global capital is waging against us".

A parallel development somewhat in the above direction but far less radical followed particularly at the initiative of the UNDP. The emphasis here was on pointing out that much could still be done to reconcile the existing structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the IMF with a human development agenda. This development was particularly important for Bangladesh which being a highly aid dependent country had to reconcile its human development policies with its existing structural adjustment reform policies.

The 1990 UNDP Human Development (HD) Report gave a new interpretation of the human development emphasizing that it is primarily[11] "a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical of these wide ranging choices are to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. Additional choices

include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect". The Report further emphasized that" development enables people to have these choices" although[12] "no one can guarantee human happiness and the choices people make are their own concern. But the process of development should at least create a conducive environment for people, individually and collectively, to develop their full potential and to have a reasonable chance of leading productive and creative lives in accord with their needs and interests".

The 1990 UNDP Report, also developed a Human Development Index that included not only income but also life expectancy, literacy and command over the resources to enjoy a decent standard of living. More important, the index is claimed to have the[13] "the potential for refinement as more aspects of human choice and development are quantified".

The 1991 UNDP Report developed the human development concept, further. It highlighted, the role of national governments with focus on the question how they could generate resources to promote human development. The report concluded that[14] "an enormous amount could be saved. (more than $ 50 billion a year) by restricting national budgets away from wasteful expenditure on the military and on loss-making public enterprises, for example, and towards more relevant priorities such as basic education and primary health care".

The report suggested the use of four ratios indicating the proportion of national income committed to priority human expenditure. The ratios highlighted some disturbing anomalies: many developing countries spend more than 25% of their GNP

through the budget, yet direct less that a tenth of this expenditure at human priority development .[15]

The report further discovered that less than 7% of the total aid of the bilateral donors as a whole was going to human priority areas in developing countries. It concluded that[16]. "even modest restructuring could achieve a great deal: reallocating just a third of today's aid could produce a four fold increase in the amount going to human priority concerns"

The report's conclusion was clear and unambiguous: The lack of political commitment, not of financial resource, is often the real cause of human neglect[17].

The UNDP report 1992, brought another dimension of human development in the forefront: people contribute to growth and growth contributes to human well-being. The definition of human development, therefore, has to be comprehensive enough to bring human being in the forefront of development.

It was observed that[18] "human development concerns all activities from production processes to institutional changes to policy dialogues. It is development focused on people and their well-being. It is as concerned with the generation of economic growth as with basic needs as with the spectrum of human aspirations, as concerned with human distressed of the North as with the human deprivation in the South. Human development, as a concept is broad and comprehensive. But it is guided by a simple idea people always come first".

This concern for "people first" led the 1992 UNDP report to have a hard look on the question of the "sustainability" of the

current development process. It was realized that although the world as a whole made tremendous economic and technological progress over the last two centuries, "the 23% of world's people living in the industrialized countries of the North earn 85% of the world's income. The strains of this level of economic activity are felt in the loss of forests and species, the pollution of rivers, lakes and oceans, the accumulation of greenhouse gases and the depletion of life preserving ozone.[19]

The situation gets further worsened by the incidence of high poverty in the rest of the world. "Some 1.4 to 2 billion of the world's 5.3 billion people in 1991 lived in poverty" [20]. They depend "on the oil for food, the river for water and the forests for fuel. Even though they need these resources desperately, the poor have little choice without assets or income but to overuse and destroy these resources simply to survive. In doing they threaten their well being and that of their of their children".[21]

The 1992 UNDP report, therefore, emphasized the interdependent nature of our planet. The developed countries must share their prosperity with the developing world. Most importantly, by the minimum requirements for achieving sustainable development in developing countries included [22]:

- Elimination of poverty;
- A reduction in population growth;
- More equitable distribution of resources;
- Healthier, more educated and better trained people;
- Decentralized, more participatory government;
- More equitable, liberal trading systems within and among countries, including increased production for local consumption;

- Better understanding of the diversity of ecosystem, locally adapted solutions to environmental problems and better monitoring of the environmental impact of development activities.

Simultaneously, the 1992 UNDP report raised the question of link between freedom and development. It observed that[23]:

> "It is true that and autocratic government can sometimes engineer fundamental reforms and promote social concerns.. But is the difficult to establish durable connection between authoritarian rule and economic or social development. For every example of an authoritarian state that has other examples where authoritarian rule merely led to economic stagnation or complete economic chaos".

Admitting that the link between freedom and development is difficult to measure quantitatively, the report grouped political freedom into five broad clusters, reflecting values common to all cultures, all religions and all stages of development. These are: (a) personal security; (b) rule of low; (c) freedom of expression; (d) political participation and (e) equality of opportunity. The report also pointed out how these five clusters could be related to the main institutions of society that protect or abuse human rights. According to it [24] "the legislature represents political participation; the executive branch has a critical role in equality of opportunity; the judiciary is responsible for rule of law and the physical integrity of individual for rule of law and the physical integrity of individual; civil society and the fourth estate', are important

barometers of freedom of expression, including freedom of association and movement.

The UNDP Human Development Report 1992 was followed by its Human Development Report 1993 where it put renewed emphasis on people's participation"[25].

> "People's participation is becoming the central issue of our time. The democratic transition in many developing countries, the collapse of many socialist regimes, and the worldwide emergence of people's organizations these are all part of a historic change, not just isolated events".

The report further urged that[26] "this is the vision national and global decision makers must consider if the 1990s are to emerge as a new water shed in peaceful development --- and if the 21st century is to see the full flowering of human potential all over the world. The process of change ushered in by the events of the past few years must now be carried forward with great courage and resolution"

The UNDP report on Human Development in 1994 put added emphasis[27] on (i) transfer of resources through " peace dividend" (reduction of global military expenditures in favour of sustainable human development with focus on the developing countries) (ii) protection of world environment from further degeneration and degradation.

With the above development in the fields of non-conventional approach to environmental protection and sustainable human resources development at the international level, we would now turn to the response of Bangladesh.

## Part-III: The Specific Response of Bangladesh to the Conventional and Non-Conventional approaches to Environmental Protection and Sustainable Human Development

The case of the response of Bangladesh to the above conventional and non-conventional development in the field of environment and SHD would be presented under three sub heads: (a) the early effort of Bangladesh for achieving SHD through its own variety of socialist reconstruction particularly in the macro-economic approach to development; (b) the question of choice of human indicators for SHD development in Bangladesh within the framework of market economy, and finally (c) the process of internalization of this new approach through development of a number of human freedom indicators in Bangladesh that is now in process.

### (I) The early effort of Bangladesh to achieve SHD through socialist reconstruction

Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971 through a liberation war triggered by a mass movement against injustice and inequity. After independence, it faced the formidable problem of not only economic but also socio-political rehabilitation and reconstruction. In retrospect, it took the economy alone almost six long years to come back to its 1970 benchmark. In addition, it had to (i) resettle about a million refugees who had fled to the neighboring country during the liberation war; (ii) recover arms from various splinter groups who were threats to each other in the immediate post-liberation period and (iii) unite a population that appeared divided in

several ideological camps on the question of national identity and socio-political reconstruction.

In the field of SHD, the leaders who came to power in 1971 assumed that capitalistic democracy was essentially expletive, it creates poverty and unemployment and de-humanizes the poor. As such, the aim of economic reconstruction in the post-independent period should be to promote development of a socialistic society.

The transition of a semi-feudal semi-capitalist country like Bangladesh towards its socialistic goal, however, was to be a gradual process. To help achieve this goal, the First Five year plan (1973-78) presented twelve objectives before the new nation with the emphasis that poverty alleviation was the foremost objective of the plan. It envisaged both production and institutional program for development. It visualized a need for restructuring institutions to meet the problems of organization of rural people, utilization of resources and development of local planning system. It identified weaknesses in the institutional system as "one imposed from the top, non-representative in character and a channel for distribution and utilizations, of resource from outside without adequate emphasis on mobilization resources from within[28].

To achieve the above objective, the First Five Year Plan (1973-78) proposed political and institutional intervention with focus on socialism[29].

> "The political leadership must be dedicated to the ideals of socialism. It will have to provide the leadership in

> bringing about a social transformation. The party leadership must shoulder the obligation and responsibility to set examples in social behavior and come up with bold new ideas for social action, which will give them the normal authority to effect desired changes""

The above presentation shows that the planners considered development more a matter of political economy than a market economy. This perception of economic development, however, changed with the violent overthrow of the government in 1975. The subsequent change in the planning concept is described below.

## (II) Sustainable Human Development through Market Economy

The First FYP was followed by a Two year Development Programme (1978-80). Its main pre-occupation was the completion of on-going projects and programs with necessary pruning and expenditure adjustments in view of the acute resource constraints particularly following the oil price hike in the international market in the mid 1970s. This interim adjustment period also gave the planners the required time for thinking about the long term direction of the development of the country. While formulating the Second Five year Plan (1980-85), the question of sustainable development came to the forefront.

However, the plan this time tried to base its prescription for growth and development more on the market economy than socialistic reconstruction. as a result, the Second Five Plan,

paved the way for a more capitalist process of development in the following years.

This reappearance of the merit of capitalist market economy was reinforced by the instrument of structural adjustment reform policies initiated mainly by the World Bank and IMF particularly after the mid 1980s through the structural Adjustment Facility Loans. As a result, in the 1980s the following "corrections" got incorporated in the framework of national thinking through the Second Five Year Plan (1980-85) on planned economic development[30].

1. No development ideology can be sustained for long without an incentive structure based on material reward. The best way of achieving a rational and efficient incentive structure is through opening up of the economy to the market forces. The main task of the Government should, therefore, be the creation of a supportive environment to achieve the above objectives through appropriate structural adjustment in the economy within a given time frame.

2. For alleviation of poverty, the most important requirements was accelerated growth. A high growth rate helps poverty alleviation through a trickle down process of increased opportunities for increased employment and income.

3. Increase investment in the social sector (education, health, social welfare, etc) contributes to growth by increasing the skill and productivity of labour. So, along with promoting private investment through an appropriate incentive structure efforts should be made to increase investment in the social sector.

However, the second phase of development planning in Bangladesh was characterized not only by a reassertion of the superiority of market oriented economy but also by an independent growth process that brought social development as important strategy for both poverty alleviation and sustainable human development in the mainstream of economic thought in this country.

## (III) Efforts to reallocate resources in favour of SHD in Mid -Term Plans

The Third Five Year Plan (1985-1990) of Bangladesh initiated the process of this reconciliation between resource requirement for growth vs. human development) through development of a Social Accounting Matrix Based Applied General Equilibrium[31]. It divided the population into ten main social groups mainly in terms of land ownership. The model, made some efforts to examine the impact of reallocation of resources in the sector based Annual Development Programme of Bangladesh on the different social groups. However, the model could not be put into effective operation because of the lack of data

The Fourth Five year Plan (1990-95) tried to give a more explicit orientation to the concept of sustainable human development based planning. Its primary objective was poverty reduction and generation of employment through human resources development. It was also assumed that this would simultaneously promote higher rates of growth through mobilizing the development potentials of the poor through social development. For such social development, the main

emphasis was on decentralized participatory planning with focus on organizing the poor at the grassroots.

## (IV) Adoption and Expansion of Development of Human Development Indicators in Bangladesh

The decade of 1990 started in Bangladesh with an overthrow of the military regime and the consequential restoration of democracy along with its pledges for immediate human and social development and the intensification of pressure by the donors for further structural adjustment reform policies in the country. In the initial years, the policy makers had to give greater importance to the latter compulsion partly because they were heavily dependent on foreign assistance and also partly because there was the presumption particularly among the donors that macro-economic stabilization was a necessary condition for sustainable human development. By mid 1990s, the new government not only claimed that substantial progress in this filed of implementation of structural adjustment reform policies could be achieved but also that the policies had become substantially internalized. The main achievement in the area were as follows:

### (a) Progress towards Macro-Economic Stabilization[32]

(i) **Increased self-reliance :** In 1989-90 nearly the entire Annual Development Programme (ADP) was financed by foreign assistance. By 1994-95, domestic financing of ADP stood at about 43%. In real terms; ADP expenditure was slightly negative during 1984-95 to 1989-90 while it grew at 9.8% during 1990-91-1994-95.

(ii) **Fiscal Policy :** The tax-GDP ratio had increased over 0.5% per annum during 1990-91 to 1994-95 while the top individual tax rate of 25% and corporate income tax rate of 40% was among the lowest in South Asia.

Owing to improved fiscal measurement, the overall fiscal deficit had declined from 7.9% of GDP in 1989-90 to 5.1% in 1994-95.

(iii) **Export performance :** Similarly, following the strong export performance (export grew at 5.4% to 12.1% a against the growth of import from 18.3% to 20.2% during 1980-84 to 1994-95), particularly in non-traditional sectors, the current account deficit had declined from 7% of the GDP in 1989-90 to 3.6% in 1994-95.

(iv) **Inflation :** The average inflation rate was about 10% in the 1980; it dropped to 5.2% in 1994-95.

The above achievement of substantial short run stability enabled the government to increase domestic resources for enhanced human resources development (investment in social sector has gone up from about 12 to nearly 30%) and increase its support for both safety net and income generating activities in the public sector designed to help the poor and the disadvantaged.

In 1994, thus there was hope that, given the achievement in the short terms macro economic management of the country, it would be possible to give greater attention for a shift to a high growth path in the future but 1995-96 caught the country into violent political turmoil (mainly over the modality of general election for transfer of power from one government to the other). Consequently many of the above indicators deteriorated

during this period. For example: (i) the country's fiscal deficit rose to 6% of the GDP in 1995-95; (ii) its foreign exchange reserve dwindies to $ 2.07 billion from $ 3.07 billion over last June; and (iii) export growth rate dipped from 15% to 8% over the same period.

**(b) The progress towards Social Development.**

The achievement in the above macro-economic indicators of the early 1990s and the difficulties that the economy faced in the mid 1990s made the question of sustainable human development more important in Bangladesh. There was increasing enquiry about who benefited when macro economic indicators improved and who suffeed most when these indices were down. There were apprehensions that in the period of relative higher growth, it was the affluent section of the society that was getting the largest share of the benefit while at the time of relative hardship

21. Ibid;
22. Ibid;
23. Ibid; P-29
24. Ibid; P-30
25. UNDP: Human Development Report; 1993; Oxford University Press; Delhi; 1993; P-1.
26. Ibid;
27. UNDP: Human Development Report; 1994; Oxford University Press; Delhi; P-47-58.
28. The First Five Year Plan of Bangladesh (1973-78); Government of Bangladesh: P-2
29. Ibid;
30. The Second Five-Year Plan of Bangladesh (1980-85); Government of Bangladesh: P-87.
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