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**RAFAL BAUM**

Poznań University of Life Sciences, Poland

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
– A MODERN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT**

Key words: economic development, sustainable development, environmental economics,  
development economics, natural environment

**ABSTRACT.** This article was created to present a broader, more critical view of the idea and concept of sustainable development, which has dominated the discourse on development for several decades. Based on the analysis of the literature on the subject, an attempt was made to state and explain how the original assumptions of the concept should be understood today. The most important contemporary challenges related to sustainable development have been identified. First, a historical analysis of the concepts of development and sustainable development was conducted, based on which it could be noticed that the original assumptions of the ideas have been forgotten. Then, the main dimensions (areas) of sustainable development in the literature of the last thirty years were examined. It has been noticed that the dimensions and their relations were very varied, and, first of all, defined in a rather general way. In an attempt to overcome that inaccuracy, efforts have been made to define the dimensions of sustainable development in a more precise way. Based on the analysis of the literature of the subject, it was determined that it was necessary to define the concept of sustainable development in a broader way, through the prism of 6 hierarchical dimensions: an expanded and modified economic area, a social justice area, an area of environment, an area of needs and rights, a democracy area as well as an area of long-term perspective and relations. The performed research confirmed that if sustainable development was to represent the most important current and future development issues, it should be structured around the key demands raised by scientists.

**INTRODUCTION**

Ongoing social, economic, environmental or political changes are a real challenge for decision-makers and entire societies, as well as for future generations. At the end of the 20th century, in response to the growing environmental crisis and inequalities in global development, the international community adopted sustainable development as the leading model of development [Rockström et al. 2009, Wass et al. 2011, Footprint Network 2020],

a driving force and a way to define directions of activities [Christen, Schmidt 2012]. At the same time, there are more and more questions raised whether the paradigm<sup>1</sup> of sustainable development that is currently applicable, and which in many documents is often reduced to a set of recommendations and suggestions, is adequate to present conditions, to what extent it exists in contemporary macroeconomics (development economics), and whether it is going to work as a model for future socio-economic development [Robinson 2004, Du Pisani 2006, Kuhlman, Farrington 2010, Mahrane et al. 2012, Griggs et al. 2013].

Is there actually a need to correct the concept of sustainable development or, perhaps, it is advisable to go back to the roots of the idea? As can be seen, based on the history of many theories and concepts, it usually takes several decades (the period of time that is required to observe and confirm facts) to convince the scientific community to change their thought patterns. The issue mentioned above seems significant: sustainable development can remain an unfulfilled idea and a collection of clichés or it can become the embodiment of real change in the lives of societies [Fergus, Rowney 2005, Sneddon et al. 2006, Rees 2010, Wass 2011].

To overcome such a situation and hope to achieve the goals of sustainable development in the future, it is necessary to counteract and try to revise the evolution and basic principles of the concept – its operational objectives and dimensions, taking the complex and evolving nature of the priorities of development in today’s world into account. The author’s aim is not to present all the problems discussed currently on the need to change the definition of SD principles. Such an intention would not be feasible in a short article (so far more than 70 definitions of SD have been identified in the foreign literature on the subject, cf. FAO [2017]).

The aim of the article is to analyze the evolution of the original assumptions of the concept of sustainable development and attempt to indicate their significance for the contemporary understanding of sustainable development and the currently defined goals of sustainable development.

The intention is also to indicate a new path in the search for an answer to the question why the principles of sustainable development are so slowly implemented in practice. The article is a voice in the discussion on a more complete definition of SD, which should facilitate the formulation of economic and social development strategies that take the conditions in which humanity currently functions into account.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Encyklopedia PWN (Polish Scientific Publisher’s Encyclopaedia), a paradigm is a generally recognised scientific achievement (scientific theory) that provides model solutions in a given field of science over a period of time. Some examples of paradigms are: the Copernican system, Newtonian mechanics, and Einstein’s theory of relativity. The concept of paradigm was popularised by Th.S. Kuhn.

In the considerations, carried out on the basis of domestic and foreign sources of literature on the subject, the method of analysis and criticism of the literature with elements of inductive reasoning was used. The selection of the bibliography was authorial (for obvious reasons it cannot be exhaustive – but the study of literature tried to, for example, take into account the views of selected Francophone authors who are less known in our country).

## CURRENT CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPMENT

In May 2019, at the request of the United Nations, a report was published, created by 145 experts from 50 countries, in which the current state and future of the planet was presented [IPBES 2019]. The message of the report is dramatic – it describes the unprecedented scale of the disappearance of wildlife and the mass extinction of species. According to scientists, as a consequence of human activities, a million species could become extinct, forests could disappear and water could become severely polluted. The authors of the report also point out the unprecedented rate at which the biodiversity of the Earth is disappearing. In the conclusions based on “the balance of the state of nature”, scientists emphasize that urgent and decisive actions are necessary to stop the degradation of the global ecosystem. The need to make as much effort as possible to prevent further climate change was pointed out. Nevertheless, the report that contained the above-mentioned important and urgent findings received moderate attention from politicians and the media.

Meanwhile, phenomena confirming climate change are increasing. The events recorded in recent years have taken place on an unprecedented scale – bushfires in Australia and of forests in the Amazon, the strongest hurricanes in history (e.g. Dorian in 2019), record floods (e.g. in Venice in 2019 and 2020). Changes are also visible in our country (droughts and steppe-formation, air pollution).

During the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York, on 23 September 2019, politicians were asked to show courage to create a world that would be free from CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Greta Thunberg, a young Swedish woman, stated in her emotional speech: „People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing, we are on the verge of the greatest mass extinction of species and you only think about the money and keep dreaming your fairy tales about eternal economic growth. How dare you!”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Greta Thunberg was awarded the title Man of the Year by Time magazine. Greta criticizes politicians who deny that it is humans who bring climate disaster to Earth. The activist has motivated millions of young people from around the world to fight in the streets for their future (the so-called Fridays for Future climate strike). The teenager from the capital of Sweden has become a symbol of the movement, a well-known, admired and influential personality [<https://polskatimes.pl/greta-thunberg-najnowsza-ikona-mlodziezy-na-calym-swiecie/ar/c1-1445530>].

During the Climate Change Conference COP 25 in Madrid, in December 2019, politicians „proved”, once again, that it was not possible to reach an agreement regarding the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Although the debate was extended by 2 days, no consensus was reached on the key issues. Representatives of more than 200 countries from around the globe merely agreed to „the urgent need for climate action”. The countries that contributed to the failure of the debate were mainly China, India and Brazil.

According to the research conducted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, climate change can be mitigated by separating greenhouse gas emissions from economic and population growth. Those two factors are the main source of the increase in emissions [IPCC 2019]. Sadly, over recent years, many countries have denied that possibility – an example was the approach of the United States (the world’s second-largest producer of CO<sub>2</sub>, followed by China) which in 2019, withdrew from the historic Paris Agreement to limit climate change [Deutsche Welle 2020]. In June 2017, President Trump declared that the USA “completely suspends the implementation of the non-binding Paris Agreement and the draconian financial and economic burden that was imposed on the country” [FORBES.pl 2019]<sup>3</sup>. The current situation, despite (or rather in correlation with) the recently observed „awakening” of global elites, clearly indicates that it is necessary to reorient the existing model of economic development [Griggs et al. 2013].

## GENESIS OF THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

The issue of development has been present in economic theory for over 2 centuries. Despite many attempts to understand development in a broader way, the concept of development was narrowed down to the category of economic growth for the vast majority of the time. It was only the identified ecological issues and problems that have been growing for several decades that brought attention to the crisis of classical economic theories and triggered the negation of the basic paradigm of neoclassical economics, which is continuous, uninterrupted economic growth [Burda, Wyplosz 2009, p. 54].

The fact that development is both a quantitative and qualitative concept, not only limited to the creation of economic wealth, was noticed 100 years ago and was written

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<sup>3</sup> Recently, there have been changes in climate policy overseas. President Joe Biden signed a decree regarding the return of the USA to the Paris Agreement from 2015 and, during the summit that was organized on Earth Day (22 April 2021), the politician announced the implementation of certain targets of reduction of greenhouse gases (GHG) by 2030 to enable achieving climate neutrality by mid-century at the latest [cf. <https://tvn24.pl/biznes/ze-swiata/szczyt-klimatyczny-joe-biden-o-inwestycjach-w-czysta-gospodarke-5076165>].

in the Covenant of the League of Nations<sup>4</sup>. A similar understanding of development, as a concept that covers economic and social issues at the same time, was also clearly visible in the Declaration of Philadelphia from 1944<sup>5</sup>.

After World War II, it was believed that an era of unlimited economic growth was coming. According to some scientists [Rist 2013], that apotheosis was initiated by the US President, Harry Truman, in his inaugural speech in 1949. The President, by emphasizing the superpower role of the United States (also as an economic leader), divided the world into economically developed countries and „underdeveloped areas” At the same time, Harry Truman considered economic development and growth to be the only policies that could ensure human development and prosperity („greater production is the key to prosperity and peace”). Moreover, according to the President, the prosperity of the poor countries of the South depended on the rich North investing in them [Truman 1949].

Gilbert Rist noticed that every country was infected by the ideology of development understood in the way described above – both northern and southern countries. In his analysis, the scientist opposes the strict division between developed and developing countries. In his view, the development strategies of the wealthy states that emerged after World War II (the policy of which is based on economic practices designed to promote growth) and the development strategies applied in poor countries are just two modalities of the same political ideology. In this way, Gilbert Rist points out that poverty is not a sign of a disease of capitalism but it is evidence of its good health. From that perspective, fighting poverty is limited to mitigating its most catastrophic consequences rather than transforming the system that creates it.

It should be noted that in the twentieth-century literature concerning economic development, the concept of development gradually began to be replaced with the concept of progress. The point of reference was the Western model of development supported by a strong current of rationalism and analytical approach, according to which science and technology could address almost any problem by the progressive domination of human

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<sup>4</sup> Although this document regulated some social issues in a rather controversial way („entrusting the protection of people, who are still unable to govern themselves under the particularly difficult conditions of the modern world, to the developed nations”), it referred to many important issues which are necessary for the development of societies, such as ensuring peace, preventing wars, the development of international cooperation, compliance with legal norms and international obligations or the settlement of disputes in a peaceful way [League of Nations 1919].

<sup>5</sup> The Declaration of Philadelphia is a statement of goals that were adopted by the International Labor Organization and it included basic principles of economic justice. According to the declaration: Labor is not a commodity; freedom of speech and association is essential to progress; poverty in any region is a threat to prosperity; all human beings, regardless of race, religion or gender, have the right to pursue both material well-being and spiritual development under the conditions of freedom and dignity, economic security and equal opportunities [ILO 1944].

over nature<sup>6</sup>. Progress was understood as a directional and unlimited process, of which growth was also a prerequisite [Villeneuve, Richard 2005]. In the 1980s, during the wave of neoliberalism, the concept of development underwent another modification. Political and economic transformations in South American countries, followed by Reagan and Thatcher governments in the US and UK respectively, resulted in a shift away from state protection of national markets, increased globalization, and the development of large private corporations in an environment of „free and undistorted” competition, i.e. completely open markets [Wai 2007].

Criticism of neoliberalism, resulting from the negative impact of its assumptions and practices on the global economic order, selected areas of social life and the environment, has led to the emergence of a sort of counterweight to unbridled growth [Droba 2014]. Currently, the term “development” means access to sustainable (in the basic sense of the term) and balanced economic growth [Grinevald 2004], recognising these two conditions for development and growth as closely related and equivalent.

To sum up, the term “development” is historically burdened, whether from the perspective of international relations, economic inequality or attitudes towards ecosystems<sup>7</sup>. The word „development” is also quite vague and polysemic, burdened with an initial acceptance of „underdevelopment”, which is closely associated with Western concepts and interests. There are also some stereotypes concerning development, which are unfavorable for human-nature relations. Notwithstanding this fact, development means something finally oriented and aimed at improving the quality of life of societies.

## THE ORIGINS (REBIRTH) OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Economics, as an independent scientific discipline, emerged from philosophy that has a holistic approach to scientific cognition. The need to return to the concept of economics applying holism – a holistic approach to the studied issue (problem, phenomenon) – instead of reductionism and assuming the explanation of reality in accordance with nature and reason, taking moral norms in human life into account, was noticed in the second half of the twentieth century (1980s in Poland) [Stankiewicz 2000, Poskrobko 2013]. Thus, it was concluded that “mainstream economics had built-in limitations – it did

<sup>6</sup> In the seventeenth century, the theocentric paradigm was replaced with the anthropocentric perspective. It was a period of technological development, and the philosophical concepts that were popular in the Renaissance and propagated by Descartes and Francis Bacon initiated a scientific revolution proclaiming the subordination of the laws of nature to the human will (a system of philosophical rationalism, „new universal science”, and a belief in sustainable progress) [cf. Ijsseling 1976].

<sup>7</sup> The need for correction of the existing models and economic paradigms of development in the Anthropocene epoch in which we find ourselves in is raised more and more often [cf. Baum 2019].

not account for the presence of non-market organisations and institutions” [Bartkowiak 2005, p. 122]. That situation led to the emergence and development of a new area of economic knowledge: economics of sustainable development, ecological economics and environmental economics. The subject of the economics of sustainable development is no longer capital management but management in the society-economy-environment macro-system. According to this type of economics, economic processes should not violate basic abiotic and biotic natural processes, should be friendly to the human organism and society, simultaneously ensuring profitability (bring profit) – they should be oriented to the paradigm of SD [Poskrobko 2013].

Although sustainable development is very frequently associated with the 1987 Bruntland Report, which presents the most famous definition of it<sup>8</sup>, this report did not initiate the concept or the term itself. Ecological issues were prominent long before the 20th century. The term „sustainable use” appears in the 18th century in forestry<sup>9</sup>. It was first used in 1713 by von Carlowitz („nachhaltende Nutzung”) in a book concerning forest management, later the term also appears in France. In 1828, in his „Treatise on Political Economy”, Say worried about the imminent loss of fossil energy sources. In 1864, Marsh, as one of the first environmentalists, drew attention to human impact on the environment („Man and Nature, or physical geography as modified by human action”). The issues of pollution, biodiversity conservation, resource depletion, solidarity with future generations, conspicuous consumption and the impossibility of continuous growth arise long-standing concern among philosophers and economists [Joumard 2011a, p. 23-26].

In the first half of the 20th century, the aforementioned environmental concerns seem to have disappeared. They reappear after World War II. A global threat is raised by two naturalists, Fairfield Osborn [1948] and William Vogt [1948]. Their works, predicting a future global environmental disaster, open up a discourse (reminiscent of malthusianism) around overarching categories, such as “planet” and “earth”, and the environmentally destructive role of humans. At the same time (1946), a Brazilian doctor and geographer, de Castro, addressed (in a way that today would be called “sustainable”) the subject of hunger. He wrote “it is not enough to produce food with available techniques, it is also necessary that these foods be acquired and consumed by the human groups who need them”. René Dumon and Bernard Rosier [Joumard 2011a, p. 31], using the same rhetoric, published their book “The hungry future” in 1966.

<sup>8</sup> This definition is usually quoted in an abbreviated form: „sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [WCED 1987].

<sup>9</sup> According to some French authors, the origins of sustainable forest management can be seen in a decree by the first ruler of the Valois dynasty, Philip VI (l’Ordonnance royale de Brunoy of 1346). In the aforementioned decree, King encourages forest owners to manage them in a way that protects forest resources (Article 4: „... should perpetually be subdued in good condition”) – cf. Vincent Clément [2004] and Robert Joumard [2019].



The first global voice on environmental thinking was the UN Secretary-General U-Thant's Report „Problems of the Human Environment” (Resolution No. 2390), presented to the General Assembly session on May 26, 1969. U-Thant's report outlined the status of environmental risk and the need to protect all of Earth's natural resources. It raised awareness of the global threat and provided the impetus for environmental protection measures in most civilized countries [UN 1969].

In the early 1970s, the concept of eco-development emerged. In June 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm. At that time, environmental protection was elevated to the status of a basic state function, and the term ‚environmental protection policy’ appeared [UNEP 1972]. It is generally agreed that the above-mentioned conference marked a turning point in the development of international environmental policy; the meeting recognized that economic activity should be subordinated to ecological and social considerations (that policy was continued in the following years)<sup>10</sup>.

In the same year, the report “Limits to growth” was published. It was commissioned by the Club of Rome and prepared by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [Meadows et al. 1972]. This publication examines the future of humanity in the face of Earth's population growth and resource depletion. The report becomes an important argument for questioning the continued economic growth and Western development model.

The World Conservation Strategy was another document that influenced the Brundtland Report „Our Common Future” and laid the foundation for defining sustainable development [IUCN 1980]. This is a first international document concerning the conservation of living resources, which was developed with the participation of governments, NGOs and experts. According to this report, sustainable development should promote conservation rather than hinder it. This strategy highlights priority conservation-related issues and the way how to address them – a message that lays out both an intellectual framework and practical guidance (for policymakers, environmentalists and development practitioners) for necessary conservation actions. The World Charter of Nature is another important document recognizing the need for nature conservation as a condition for the continuity of civilization and human survival (and formulating general assumptions in this regard) [UN 1982]. From this point onwards, the concept of sustainable development was already widespread among ecological and environmental professionals, but at the same time largely still ignored (or at best misunderstood).

The Report of the World Commission on the Environment and Development [WCED 1987], containing the already mentioned best known definition of sustainable development, specified that two notions are crucial for a proper understanding of what sustainable development is, namely the concept of basic needs and the idea of limited

<sup>10</sup> The eco-development perspective refers to what might be called the logic of needs, as opposed to the earlier logic of production [cf. Sachs et al. 1981].



possibilities. The concept of „needs” refers specifically to the basic needs of the world’s poorest people, who should be given the highest priority, while the idea of „limitations” refers specifically to the resilience of the global ecological system (the imposed capacity of the environment to meet present and future needs by means of the state of technology and social organization). This report also concerns maintaining social equality between generations (which, logically, should include the same generation). It should be noted that the model of development, which is currently recognized as essential, was far from being so at the time of its publication. Although the Brundtland Report, as demonstrated above, did not make any discoveries nor deviated significantly from previously published ideas for development, it was nevertheless an extremely important piece of information sent to a wide forum, setting the further direction of the discussion. The report offered hope for a “more prosperous, just and secure future,” highlighting “the possibility of a new era of economic growth,” the ability to ensure “sustainable progress” to all humanity. It made it possible to take responsibility for the issue of (sustainable) development at an international policy level.

The global sanction of sustainable development took place in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro at the UN Conference on Environment and Development, attended by the leaders of 110 countries. A programme of action called Agenda 21 was adopted on the conference. Agenda 21 set out the conditions for the introduction of a new social and economic order that would give rise to the ecological era<sup>11</sup>. Since then, in addition to the three standard dimensions of sustainable development, a fourth dimension – an institutional one, also called „democracy” or „governance” – has begun to be distinguished and taken into consideration.

To sum up, the concept of sustainable development was not born with the Brundtland Report. The origins of environmental issues are much earlier. Their renaissance was after World War II<sup>12</sup> and the understanding of the term itself, in the form we know today, began to spread from the 1970s and was the result of targeted actions by people from UN circles. After nearly 40 years of evolution, the concept of sustainable development is increasingly entering the mainstream of discussions concerning socio-economic development, becoming a horizontal principle reflected in all state development policies. Currently, most countries have supported the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which, together with 169 specific targets, form the core of the 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy that

<sup>11</sup> The so-called conference „Earth Summit” see [<https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/Konferencja-Szczyt-Ziemi;3924905.html>].

<sup>12</sup> The emergence or resurgence of the concept of sustainable development, however, is more pivotal to Western (Christian) civilization, based on the Bible, which places humans at the center of the universe and allows them to adapt nature to their needs. There are more integrative, holistic features in Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism) and animistic religions. In these societies (even in ancient civilizations), a more cyclical conception of values – being rather than owning and harmony between human and nature – is more akin to the concept of sustainability [cf. Joumard 2011, 50-53].

was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 [United Nations 2015]<sup>13</sup>. Sustainable Development Goals, however, do not create any theoretical definition of sustainable development, but a policy agenda (set of goals) for use by policy makers.

## DIFFERENT APPROACHES IN DEFINING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is usually presented in several dimensions (orders, areas and spheres). However, definitions of individual dimensions and their interrelationships vary from author to author. It can be historically observed that the environmental dimension was added to socio-economic development and then those two aspects – economic and social – were separated, forming, besides the environment, the three core pillars of sustainable development. Other aspects such as institutional factors, a long-term development perspective, human needs, culture or ethics are sometimes extracted as stand-alone dimensions of sustainable development and sometimes are integrated with some of the core three dimensions [Waas et al. 2011, Diemer 2017].

A critical review of the literature related to the issue of sustainable development by Jabareen [2008, p. 179] indicates that the definitions of this phenomenon are unclear. There is no agreement of what should be sustainable, or how to operationalize that sustainability. It should also be noted that even the first three dimensions do not always cover the same content. In general, the economic area seems to be the best described and defined (it is also the best „measurable” area because of „hard” indicators such as value added or income). The social area is less clearly explained and is sometimes a source of misunderstandings: it sometimes encompasses all social aspects, including various effects on society (also environmental aspects). In other words, social area is an extremely broad concept that is not always objective. The same applies to the environmental pillar, which is most frequently a vague term, sometimes referring directly to nature, natural resources necessary for life and/or for economic activity (affecting the environment), but also referring to a broader quality of life [Joumard 2011a,b, Waas et al. 2011, Diemer 2019].

Taking a long-term development perspective into account is common but not systematic, even though it is generally regarded as a fundamental principle that relates to sustainable development (the needs of present and future generations). Needs themselves are not essentially precisely defined either – the concept of needs poses enormous problems: no one can explain where needs, even the most basic ones (excluding nutritional needs), begin and end, unless it is assumed that a need is determined by wealth, i.e. income determines the extent of human needs. The importance of the institutional factor related to governance varies, and its very definition is inconsistent, complicated and unclear

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Cele Zrównoważonego Rozwoju (Sustainable Development Goals) [<http://www.un.org.pl>].

in many cases – this dimension includes very different aspects, such as participation, institutions and democracy. Finally, the dimensions that are less frequently mentioned in the literature should be noted: culture and ethics [Hermet et al. 2005].

To sum up, the concept of sustainable development is predominantly presented in the form of several basic and additional dimensions that are not always compatible with each other; they are frequently not clear-cut; they are variable in content and sometimes differ extremely depending on the approach of the author. It can be assumed, however, that there is a consensus on the three core parallel dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental, which are currently complemented by three additional dimensions concerning needs, the long-term perspective and institutional factors. Different meanings given to ecosystems, nature, and secondly, social equality and human needs are the most striking elements in terms of diverse approaches to sustainable development. It should be noted that the social dimension lacks the deeper reflection of researchers and is dominated in terms of interrelationships by the economy and the environment, which are analyzed in more detail.

Relationships between the three core dimensions of sustainable development are usually considered important, however, the method of interpretation of these relationships remains open at the same time [Purvis et al. 2019]. The different approaches to sustainable development and the importance of individual dimensions are best seen when presented graphically (Figure 1). Each chart is specific to the type of interrelationship between the three dimensions, their hierarchy and links (weaker, stronger or systemic links).

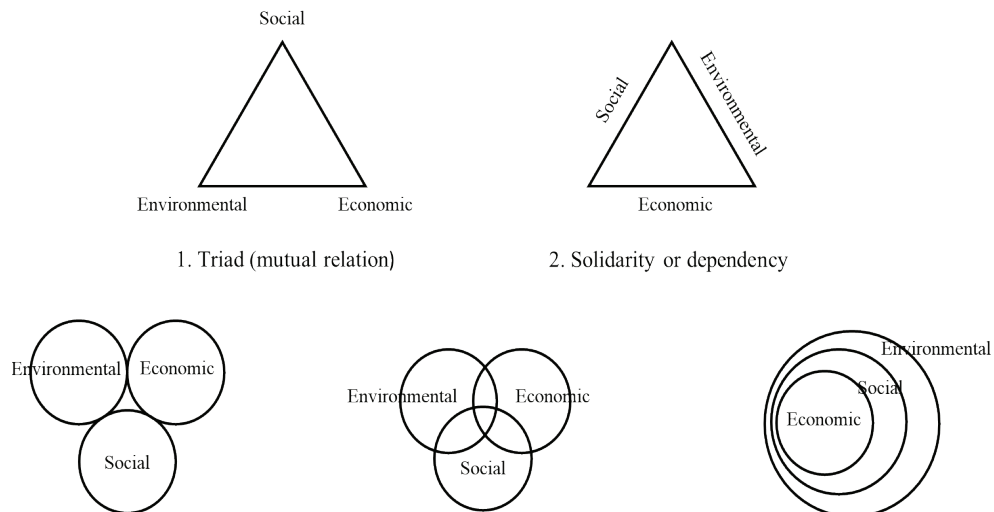


Figure 1. Ways of presenting the basic three dimensions of SD and their importance in mutual relations

Source: [Joumard 2011a, p. 60]

## CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

How, then, to understand SD today, given the imprecision and vagueness of the concept? First of all, it should be noted that the concept itself is always socially empowered because the meaning given by the term “balanced” or “sustainable development” ultimately depends entirely on human aspirations. It applies to a World where humans want to live and want to pass that World on to future generations [Waas et al. 2011].

As society is constantly evolving, sustainable development should be treated more as a goal to be pursued continuously and diligently, even if it is known that it is never likely to be achieved (as some utopian, perfect state). This is why it is so important to systematize the concept of sustainable development in general. To develop a coherent typology and overcome the numerous ambiguities and contradictions found within and between definitions of sustainable development, it appears that precise defining of each of the dimensions that together define sustainable development is necessary. As the concept is evaluated (sustainable development assessment), it is important that the hierarchy of each dimension, that is the importance and interrelationships between individual components, be determined.

The first element of the contemporary, broader approach to SD concerns its dimensions. Based on the literature study, it can be noted that the three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – should be considered (preserved) once again, in accordance with classical conceptualization. Moreover, three other cross-cutting dimensions should be considered: sustainability, needs and participation. The latter two are less commonly associated with the concept. All dimensions will be redefined and their outline modified, so that they respond to new challenges and fit into both relatively new issues that, as indicated earlier, have recently been “rediscovered” (the environment, the long-term perspective) and older issues (economic and social issues, democracy, even social needs and legal regulations). These six dimensions seem to cover all current social problems. They can be defined as follows [Hermet et al. 2005, Joumard 2011a, Diemer 2017, 2019]:

- The extended economic dimension, which is the production and exchange of goods and services that shape the income of the population, but also covers non-economic factors that were previously secondary when assessing the development of countries – the health and education levels of the population. This definition corresponds to the goal of the United Nations’ Human Development Index, which measures the actual standard of living of people in the World in a much broader way than the GDP per capita index;
- The dimension of social justice understood as social cohesion that is solidarity and social equality in terms of access to different categories of goods and services, public goods, including an unpolluted environment; in other words, equality in terms of satisfying basic needs and the enjoyment of fundamental rights;

- The environmental dimension, which refers to all the impacts of human activities on resources, ecosystems, human health, well-being or even the well-being of people (men and women), as well as anthropogenic heritage [cf. Joumard, 2011b];
- The dimension of needs and rights, which includes basic human needs and basic human rights (individual and group), as well as broader laws of nature. Basic human needs should be understood as the most fundamental foundations of human development, reasons for acting and living in society, which do not need justification and are non-negotiable (known, for example, from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs), and which should be intersected with existential categories of being and owning (“to have or to be”) [Max-Neef 1991, Rauschmayer et al. 2008];
- The dimension of governance or participation understood as collective choices of all men and women who are free and equal in the light of the law and enjoy fundamental individual and group rights. That is why, it is a democratic dimension in the basic meaning of the term democracy (which is far from being reduced to representative democracy);
- The long-term dimension that focuses on the concern for the evolution of other dimensions in the long-term future, at least several generations later, so that our decisions will not have a negative impact on the economic, social and environmental dimensions of future generations.

The second stage of adjusting the SD definition to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals recommended today concerns the interrelationships between dimensions.

Firstly, as Passet [Joumard 2011a] noted in 1979, the economy depends entirely on the environment; social justice shapes and structures the economy, however, it cannot be limited to the economy; therefore, this dimension covers the economy. Furthermore, the environment is not limited to social aspects (Figure 1, case no. 5).

Democracy is about how to manage the environment, social justice and economy, and how to define needs and rights. This dimension cannot be imagined without fundamental rights, however, it cannot be limited to them at the same time. Hence, the democratic dimension should be considered hierarchically higher than the other four dimensions, provided that the environment cannot be reduced to a particular mode of social relations (such as democracy) because the environment is a specific system that is largely independent of humans.

Basic needs and rights are more fundamental than the economy, social equality or the environmental impact, whereas long-term considerations are general in nature, although they mainly focus on human needs and human rights, as well as the laws of nature.

The proposed typology does not explicitly show the cultural dimension, which generally fits into the dimension of basic human needs and rights (the right to freedom of opinion and expression, to education, to creativity, etc.), however, it could be a separate dimension [Joumard 2011a].

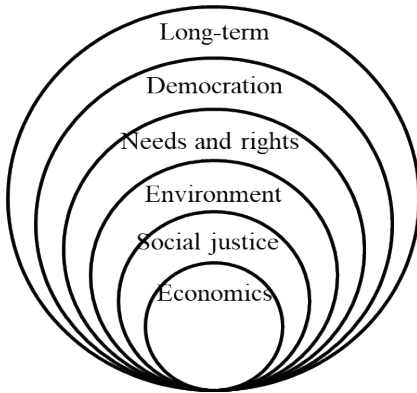


Figure 2. Six-dimensional hierarchical diagram of sustainability

Source: based on [Joumard 2011a, p. 70]

Taking the above considerations into account, a hierarchical structure, shown schematically in Figure 2, is obtained. Please note that this visualization is imperfect and simplified because it does not express all the complexity of the relationships between dimensions. In particular, this visualization does not reveal the concept of balance between dimensions, especially between the first three or four ones (from economics to human needs and rights).

## SUMMARY

At the turn of the millennia, World political leaders adopted sustainable development as a leading model for social development. However, the term „sustainable” or „balanced” development is sometimes misused and distorted despite a broad consensus on the meaning of the term among scholars and economic practitioners. Many innovative aspects were „erased” from the initial concept over time, returning to the original way of thinking and mode of operation. Sustainable development retains some resemblance of the concept, but it seems to be devoid of broader content – it says „act” but runs away from the surrounding reality [Tsing 2017].

Although the concept allows different views concerning sustainable development to coexist, haphazard conceptualizations, which are not in line with the core principles of sustainable development, undermine the concept’s goal of steering actions. This lack of understanding of the essence of the definition of sustainable development likely inhibits its practical implementation; proper understanding of the concept is urgently needed [Wass et al. 2011].

Recognizing the increasing complexity of the conditions of the modern world, the reasons for the failures in implementing the SD today should also be seen in the fact that, at the time of its inception, the concept appeared as a result of the search for a compromise model of socio-economic development (initiated in decision-making bodies of the United

Nations<sup>14</sup>). Moreover, a negative assessment of the solutions adopted in practice often results from a misunderstanding (or bad will of political decision-makers who only use a short-term cost-benefit calculation).

The conducted research leads to the following conclusions:

1. Economics is a social science encompassing a range of research problems of varying importance (from fundamental to detailed; from theoretical considerations to practical recommendations). The mainstream of this science has been focused for a long time on finding answers to the question of how to ensure economic and social development. Over the years, a succinct theory has emerged, but it has become increasingly out of touch with reality over the course of time. Because of global threats of the modern world, the assumptions of economics should be modified – the change from a short-term perspective to a long-term one, as well as more respect for the limits of nature and the principles of justice.
2. If sustainable development is to fully embody today's expectations, it must be based on several postulates that are voiced by the scientific community. Sustainable development should prioritize social issues and challenges; use a transdisciplinary approach; be based on system thinking; recognize new dimensions of sustainable development and accept embedding in dimensions that are not always compatible with each other; redefine spatial-temporal scales of development (planetary<sup>15</sup> boundaries); prioritize values and principles that can cause a change in human behavior leading to the annihilation of the Earth [Diemer 2017].
3. It seems necessary to return to the original 3 fundamental principles of sustainable development, modifying them slightly to address issues that have been rediscovered (more broadly) at the turn of the centuries. This yields 6 dimensions of sustainable development (broader economics, social justice, the environment, needs and rights, democracy and the long-term perspective) that should be prioritized.

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<sup>14</sup> Let us remind you that the prototype of the idea of sustainable development was the concept of eco-development presented at the UN conference entitled *The environment and man* in Stockholm in 1972. Eco-development as an alternative proposal has been defined as a development strategy focused on the rational use of local resources and knowledge possessed by farmers for the needs of isolated rural areas of the Third World [Gudowski 2009, p. 13-14]. The construction of the concept of eco-development was determined by the debate on the possibility of reducing differences between countries of the South and the North. It was only an intermediate solution that did not limit the need for growth and was also addressed to beneficiaries coming from rural communities and agriculture, i.e. sectors directly related to the natural environment.

<sup>15</sup> Development is sustainable if, given a certain number of economic, environmental, social or even cultural parameters, „it can be sustained over time and, it should be added, over space” [Zuindeau 2000, p. 27]. First of all, it is necessary to contrast the long-term perspective of the environment, society or culture with the short „life” of the economy (the timeless framework of models in economics prefer a static approach – general or partial – to equilibrium).



4. It is necessary to constantly update the definition of SD. Names of dimensions must be universally accepted, making their definition understandable by all people. Literature study leads us to emphasize social aspects in the definition of SD. According to the author, sustainable development is development in which an economic process (a model of production, distribution, exchange and consumption of goods) results from the collective will of all citizens, which makes it possible to meet a human's basic needs and guarantee the enjoyment of fundamental rights; it ensures environmental protection and the sustainability of ecosystems now and in the future.

To sum up, although there is growing public awareness of the need to change the direction of development, there are still „more important things” (the global crisis of 2009/2010 or the recent coronavirus pandemic) that leave such issues as global warming, resource depletion, hunger and misery in many regions of the World in abeyance. However, the above-mentioned issues force a review of the economy. Organizing it according to the principles of the concept of sustainable development seems not only a need, but even a necessity, since it is already known that the market alone does not protect humans or the environment [Midor 2012].

Economic sciences attempt to define the essence of sustainable development. The main problem is still the implementation of the original theoretical assumptions favoring ecological sustainability in practice. The attempts to practically fulfill the assumptions of sustainable development clearly show that ecology, the environment and social expectations clash with the interests of the economy. Hence, the category of sustainable development in practical terms contains many subjective and eclectic elements of a variable nature and cannot be unambiguously defined [Jeżowski 2006].

To proceed to the evaluation of sustainable development (also in agriculture) [cf. Wielicki et al. 2001], it is necessary to precisely define this term. In this article, taking a holistic perspective, the rich contemporary literature is reviewed, with particular emphasis on terminology, origins, basic principles and leading views on sustainable development. Through a critical look at the idea and identification of the most important contemporary challenges related to sustainable development, it was determined how the original assumptions of the concept should be understood.

Thus, this article has provided arguments to combat misconceptions or established patterns of thinking about sustainable development.

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## ZRÓWNOWAŻONY ROZWÓJ – WSPÓŁCZESNE ROZUMIENIE KONCEPCJI

Słowa kluczowe: rozwój gospodarczy, zrównoważony rozwój, ekonomia środowiska, ekonomia rozwoju, środowisko naturalne

### ABSTRAKT

Artykuł powstał w celu przedstawienia szerszego i bardziej krytycznego spojrzenia na ideę i koncepcję zrównoważonego rozwoju, która od kilku dekad dominuje w dyskursie na ten temat. Na podstawie analizy literatury przedmiotu podjęto próbę stwierdzenia i wyjaśnienia, w jaki sposób należy współcześnie rozumieć pierwotne założenia koncepcji. Zidentyfikowano najważniejsze współczesne wyzwania, które mają związek ze zrównoważonym rozwojem. Przeprowadzono analizę historyczną koncepcji rozwoju zrównoważonego rozwoju, z której wynika, że odeszło się od pierwotnych założeń. Następnie zanalizowano główne wymiary (obszary) zrównoważonego rozwoju w literaturze z ostatnich trzydziestu lat. Stwierdzono, że wymiary i ich relacje są bardzo zróżnicowane, a przede wszystkim ogólnie zdefiniowane. Próbuąc przewyciężyć tę niedokładność, starano się precyzyjniej określić wymiary zrównoważonego rozwoju. Na podstawie studium literatury ustalono, że konieczne jest szersze zdefiniowanie tego pojęcia przez 6 hierarchicznych wymiarów: rozszerzonego i zmodyfikowanego obszaru ekonomicznego, obszaru sprawiedliwości społecznej, obszaru środowiska, obszaru potrzeb i praw, obszaru demokracji i obszaru długoterminowej perspektywy i relacji. Badania potwierdziły, że jeśli zrównoważony rozwój chce uosabiać najważniejsze aktualne i przyszłe problemy rozwoju, powinien być skonstruowany wokół kluczowych postulatów poruszanych przez naukowców.

AUTHOR

RAFAŁ BAUM, DR HAB. PROF. PULS

ORCID: 0000-0001-5415-0555

Poznan University of Life Sciences

Faculty of Economics, Department of Law and Enterprise Management in Agribusiness

28 Wojska Polskiego St., 60-637 Poznań, Poland

e-mail: baum@up.poznan.pl