

## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: A MAJOR COMPONENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract:

Without embracing environmental sustainability (ES), the universal concept of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be achieved today. As an inseparable part of SDGs, ES can help nations to fulfill the goal of Agenda 2030. The world, particularly the developing countries, is now encountering several environmental problems, including carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emission, hazardous pollution, climate change, global warming, floods, droughts, deforestation, excessive and less rainfall crisis, scarcity of food, water and other natural resources, misuse and overconsumption of natural resources, and loss of biodiversity. All these factors heavily impact our natural environment and cause irreparable loss. Our study finds that with unsustainable socio-economic development, environmental degradation is rising worldwide. We argue that human activities in the name of development are the main reasons for destroying the environment and natural resources. In this study, we explore that despite taking significant initiatives by the United Nations to engage the member countries to protect the earth from the above-mentioned environmental problems, these problems are still prevalent in many countries worldwide. Our study finds that irresponsible human activities primarily hinder sustainable development progress, which is essential for present and future generations. In this article, embracing the environmental sustainability approach for all countries is necessary to ensure holistic, sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Environment Protection, Natural Resources, Sustainable Economic Growth, UN Agenda.



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## INTRODUCTION

Integrating environmental sustainability, a prerequisite for sustainable development, reduces the potential adverse environmental externalities related to climate change (Opoku et al., 2022). Several scientific reports show that unsustainable socio-economic development activities bring a mass level of environmental destruction. The natural environment is degrading in several ways: omitting carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), producing all types of pollution around us, over-consuming natural resources, cutting forests, deforestation, wildlife and biodiversity loss, droughts, heatwaves, floods, rising sea levels, and food insecurity. Many scientists have warned that due to unsustainable human activities, the earth is increasingly moving towards environmental collapse, which may cause the extinction of the natural biodiversity and cause loss of human life (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Ripple et al., 2017; Trisos et al., 2020). The CO<sub>2</sub> omission results from the climate change and global warming. Because of the world's temperature rise, many lower-lying countries

may have been submerged by the sea waters. However, under the Paris Agreement 2016, the member countries have pledged to reduce global temperatures below 2°C.

The world population is increasing rapidly and narrowing our planet in all ways. The growing population produces more manufacturing products that emit more greenhouse gases, deplete groundwater, and cause topsoil loss. The shrinking of forests endangers the habitats of wild animals and poses severe threats to biodiversity. Furthermore, using energy unsustainably also contributes to depleting natural resources. In addition, ineffective legal instruments, lack of long-term strategies to prevent and control environmental problems, and little interest in fostering conservation strategies also deteriorate environmental problems. There is a clear difference between environmental sustainability and socio-economic development in terms of sustainable development (O'Neill et al., 2018; Spangenberg, 2017; Weber and Weber, 2020).

The tremendous economic growth in past decades has also brought several environmental problems. The environmental problems are more acute in the rising developing countries. Although economic prosperity has contributed to eradicating poverty and improving social life, unsustainable development often attempts to degrade the environment and cause heavy loss of biodiversity and ecosystem. At the initial stage, many countries should have paid more attention to environmental sustainability. However, today, the world has responded to protect the environment, biodiversity and ecosystem. Many governments have passed domestic laws, policies, and regulations from time to time to improve the environmental quality and conserve and preserve ecosystems under the guidance of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda 2030. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development not only improves the life of humanity but also safeguards the earth (Griggs et al., 2013; O'Neill et al., 2018; Zeng et al., 2020).

Therefore, there is no alternative to adopting environmental sustainability policy at all levels for the well-being of the population and the planet. In this paper, we seek the answer to the question of how the environmental sustainability principle with global sustainable development goals can be implemented to achieve the common goals for the betterment of our beloved earth? This paper aims to assess the importance of environmental sustainability in achieving Sustainable Development Goals.

## METHODS

The article obtained data from existing works of literature, UN documents, resolutions, and reports. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) 1972 report was consulted to understand the sustainable development concept with economic improvement. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) 1983 resolution was reviewed that places the way for the prominent "Our Common Future" report. The UN Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development 1987 was reviewed, stressing the economy's and natural resources' sustainable increase. The UN Agenda 21 and Agenda 2030 were explicitly undertaken for this study to evaluate the environmental sustainability approach to achieving SDGs.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Integrating environmental sustainability and discussing sustainable development is meaningful in today's world. Environmental sustainability and sustainable development are intertwined. Indeed, protecting the environment and biodiversity is now considered an indispensable part of socio-economic development. The guidelines, agreements, conventions and declarative texts of international environmental law encourage sustainable development (Magraw, 2006). The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) of 1972 showed

concern about the environmental impacts of developing states. The UNCHE Conference addressed environmental and sustainable development issues. The Conference urged the states to adopt joint efforts with the people to preserve and conserve the human environment. The primary outcome of this Conference was acknowledging the Stockholm Declaration, which put global environmental issues at the top list, particularly economic growth and its subsequent environmental impacts on developing countries. Principle four of the Stockholm Declaration, illustrates that humans are responsible for protecting and wisely managing wildlife and its habitats, while principle five advocates sustainably using non-renewable resources and preserving them for future generations (UNCHE, 1972).

At the advent of the 80th century, the world sees growth in population, economy and environmental problems. General Assembly resolution established the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1983 (UN, 1983), whose reflection was seen in Commission's report entitled "Our Common Future" in 1987 to assess the global environment. The report revealed that massive population growth and technological advancement were mainly responsible for degrading the environment and accelerating the exploitation of world resources. The report identified that national and international institutions have failed to deal successfully with the challenges to ensure equity for the coming generations. A more significant number of problems arise from inequalities in obtaining resources (UN, 1987). So, it is inevitable to incorporate equity and environmental sustainability for sustainable economic growth.

In order to address environmental problems and their correlation with other global problems, the UN resolution 1987 of Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond has chalked out some perceptions to mitigate the problems including, protect natural resources from war conflicts; maintain sustained economic growth across the globe alongside improving world's environmental situation; eliminate mass poverty, as it is the leading cause behind environmental degradation and ensure an equitable proportion of environmental resources for all people; improve and manage of environmental constraints for worldwide sustained economic growth; incorporate environmental goals and actions while adopting national developmental policies; internalize and coordinate the environmental considerations into sectoral policies and programs to achieve sustainable development; make parties accountable who degrade the environment and will contribute to improving the situation; safeguard the wild species and adopt flexible environmental coping strategies with mass level awareness creation (UN, 1987).

The UN Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development 1987 emphasizes economic growth and increases natural resources per the needs of present and future generations. Following the previous report, the United Nations conference on environment and development 1988 addresses growing environmental problems worldwide and emphasizes sustainable growth and development worldwide. The resolution says that it is necessary to create a global economic environment for sustained economic growth and development, and it is urgent to take sufficient measures for protecting, restoring, and enhancing the global environment. Concerning the growing environmental degradation worldwide, the UN Conference on Environment and Development 1989 comes with several considerations to maintain ecological balance and protect the global life-support systems and collectively combat global environmental problems like climate change, ozone layer depletion, pollution of air and water at transboundary level, sea and ocean contamination, and land resources degradation, the resolution calls upon global, regional and national (UN, 1989).

The outcomes of the Earth Summit of Rio De Janeiro in 1992 inspired world leaders to adopt an agreement on the Convention on Biological Diversity to meet the present needs and ensure a healthy and viable world for the next generations. This international legal instrument stipulates in



article 1 to conserve and sustainably use biological diversity and its components and equally share the benefits. The 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development declares that human beings have the right to live healthy and productive lives in harmony with nature states enjoy the authority, by the national environmental laws, to exploit their natural resources within boundaries so as not to harm the environment or cause adverse environmental effects beyond of the territories (Rio Declaration, 1992). The Rio Declaration also emphasizes enacting effective environmental laws and fulfilling current and future generations developmental and environmental needs. The Declaration further states that the states should provide sufficient support and cooperation towards indigenous people and other local minority groups with traditional skills and knowledge in managing the environment.

Realizing the threat to the environment and sustainable development, the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development 1992 urges to stop the misuse of freshwater and land resources. The Conference Report stresses overconsumption, pollution, droughts and floods and urges us to take urgent action at all levels. The report sets four guiding principles, including effective management of water resources for sustainable socio-economic development; creating consciousness about successful water management among users and policy-makers; empowering women at all levels of water management, realizing the value of water resources, and making water affordable for everyone. Benefits from implementing this recommendation were expected to eradicate poverty; reduce loss of life and property damaged by natural disasters like droughts and floods; conserve and reuse water in agricultural and industrial sectors including applying "polluter pays" principle; adequate water supply needs to be ensured for sustainable urban development, adopt new approaches like rainfed agriculture to save water; implementation of integrated river basin management not only provides safeguard to aquatic ecosystems but also protects from devastating fisheries, agriculture, grazing and corners the people who depend on these; integrated management plans need to be endorsed to resolve transboundary river or lake basins dispute with the help of international agreements; and for effective integrated water-resources management, the governments need to be improved in capacity building in terms of institutional, legal arrangements and raising awareness about water resources management (Dublin Statement, 1992).

Due to growing human and economic activities on land resources, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Agenda, 21 of chapter 10, focuses on the sustainable management of land resources through an integrated approach. Agenda 21 also addresses the role and functions of trees, forests and woodlands in combatting deforestation; managing fragile ecosystems like arid lands, deserts, mountains, wetlands, islands, and coastal areas from desertification and drought; sustainable development of mountains for water, energy and biodiversity; fostering sustained agriculture and rural development for the growing number of the world population; conserving biological diversity and sustainable use of biological resources for the promoting human development; rationally use and development of the oceans and seas and their resources and imply an integrated approach to manage water resources sustainably (UN Conference on Environment & Development, 1992).

Lessening the effects of drought in fewer rainy countries or regions and combatting desertification, the Copenhagen Declaration 1995 urged countries to ratify United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. To emphasize holistic and equitable social development, paragraph six of the Copenhagen Declaration stipulates that:

"Equitable social development that recognizes empowering the poor to utilize environmental resources sustainably is a foundation for sustainable development. We also recognize that broad-based and sustained economic growth in sustainable development is necessary to sustain social development and social justice." (Copenhagen Declaration, 1995)

Environmental sustainability aims to lower human environmental impacts and promote the conservation of natural habitats. The 2000 UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 7 focuses on ensuring sustainable development. It addresses greenhouse gas reduction, strengthening collective efforts for forest management, conservation and sustainable development; complete implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity and Convention to Combat Desertification for tackling drought and desertification and implementing sustainable water management strategies for reducing unsustainable exploitation.

The 2002 UN Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development pledges that for global sustainable development, it is necessary to foster sustainable consumption and change unsustainable production patterns following the Rio principles. It urges countries to improve sustainability knowledge while exploiting resources and conducting production processes. It also prescribes a halt to environmental degradation in the name of unsustainable economic growth. Realizing the importance of ecosystems on human life and the economy and for sustainable development, the plan advocates for protecting and managing our natural resources in an integrated and sustainable manner. Simultaneously, it asks for adopting effective strategies with target settings to curb natural resource degradation and expand cooperation to minimize air pollution, acid deposition and ozone depletion at local, national, regional and global levels. Incorporating sustainable forest management will reduce deforestation, biodiversity loss, and resource degradation and improve food, water and affordable energy.

The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), Rio+20, reflects the 1992 Rio Conference. The Conference parties agreed to implement the green economy tool for sustainable development (Bartelmus, 2013). The Conference brought a non-binding document called "the future we want", in which the states were asked to reaffirm their political commitment to sustainable development (Mahbub, 2016). In order to achieve sustainable development goals, it calls for holistic and integrated approaches. These approaches will create a good path for humankind to maintain balance with nature and restore the ecosystem's health. It also reaffirms intensifying universal environmental governance for balanced, sustainable development.

In 2015, the United Nations came up with "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". The UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development set 17 goals and 169 targets. To conserve and sustainably use oceans, seas and marine resources, the agenda 2030 articulates to reduce all kinds of marine pollution by 2025; for a healthy and productive ocean, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems by 2020; to restore fish stocks by 2020, effectively regulate illegal, unregulated, harmful and overfishing and stop providing subsidies that hinder fish production; to conserve coastal and marine areas as lowest 10 percent according to domestic and international law by 2020; enhance scientific knowledge for ocean well-being and marine biodiversity; speed up the conservation process of oceans and their resources and sustainably manage them according to international Law of the Sea.

To protect, conserve and promote terrestrial ecosystems, sustainable forest management, halt land degradation and biodiversity loss, the UN agenda 2030 propagates that by 2020 to ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of mountains, forests, wetlands and drylands consistent with international agreements; by 2020 sustainably manages forests, halts deforestation and increases afforestation and reforestation around the world; protects the land from desertification and restores degraded land and soil by 2030; conserves mountain ecosystems and their biodiversity by 2030; takes necessary actions to protect natural habitats, tackle biodiversity loss and protect the endangered species from extinction by 2020; ensures fair utilization of genetic resources; takes strict measures to curb the illicit wildlife trade; decrease the impact of invasive alien species on water and land ecosystems by 2020; for a holistic development integrate

ecosystems and biodiversity values into national level; increase global cooperation for wildlife poaching and trafficking and increase sustainable livelihoods for the local communities (UN, 2015).

International environmental law has procedural tools like transparency, public participation, access to justice, environmental impact assessment and so on (Mahbub, 2016). These tools help better understand the relations between nature and humans to successfully implement sustainable development policies and laws (Magraw & Hawke, 2007). These tools' role and importance in decision-making at the national and international levels are significant. Environmental justice addresses a safe, productive, healthy and sustainable environment for all people, particularly the vulnerable and lag-behind group of our society. The direct and indirect dependency of millions of people around the world on forests, biodiversity reservoirs, wetlands, pasturelands, carbon sinks and marine resources has urgently demanded to ensure equitable benefits for a smooth and stable sustainable development.

Living in a sustainable atmosphere has been considered a potential human right. Several instruments already emerged to balance the exploitation and conservation of natural resources before the concept of sustainable development appeared on the global platform (Virginie, 2012). Since the formation of the United Nations, hundreds of international instruments and treaties have addressed the biodiversity conversation, safe water resources, protection of the seas and oceans from marine pollution and strong initiative to reduce climate change. It is undeniable that there are criticisms against the sustainable development concept that this concept hinders the progress of developing countries since its principles do not apply to the developed nations in the contemporary world. The 2017 UN Sustainable Development Indicator Framework for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) progress showed less attention to international environmental agreements (UN, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Ensuring an environmentally sustainable society for the common benefits of present and future generations is indispensable. Practicing environmental sustainability helps create a healthy planet for the current generations and saves natural resources for future ones. We can regenerate the damaged resources to meet food scarcity for the growing world population. Moreover, ensuring environmental sustainability can fulfill the goal of sustainable development. It is a great hope that many countries, including developing ones, are moving toward green environmental policies.

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