6

Sustainable Development

How Its Pursuit Relates to Environmental Violence and Why We Should Replace It with the Concept of Sustainable Life

ALICE DAMIANO

Environmental Violence Engaged

The concept of sustainable development, while aimed at improving both the human–Earth relationships and the relationships between humans, has problematic historical baggage: it is rooted in a Western idea of development, which is imbued in violence against various non-Western peoples and is perpetuating controversial takes on economic growth and appropriate technology. This renders the concept of sustainable development questionable, adding complications to the realization of its many, at times contradictory, goals. This chapter discusses issues in the concept of sustainable development and its implementation and relationship with environmental violence, suggesting a shift to the pursuit of a different concept: Sustainable Life.

6.1 Introduction

Sustainable development is a concept commonly referenced in reports, academic articles, and topical news alike, often included in discussions on how humanity should tackle contemporary social and environmental challenges. The expression *sustainable development* has become a "popular catchphrase in contemporary development discourse" [1] and has inspired an agenda adopted by all United Nations Member States [2], the *Sustainable Development Agenda* [2].

Despite its popularity, this concept is not free from issues, such as inconsistencies and questionable points. This chapter will consider the main issues in sustainable development and discuss how they relate to environmental violence, reflecting on how sustainable development can be part of the solution, part of the problem, or a combination of both. The argument made in this chapter is that humanity should shift its focus from the problematic concept of *sustainable development* to a more to-the-point concept of *sustainable life*. Let us begin with an overview of the expressions *sustainable development* and *environmental violence*.

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The expression *sustainable development* has the merit of encapsulating in just two words the acknowledgment of society's needs, the acknowledgment of the limits of the planet, and the need to *address both at the same time* or, more specifically, *have consideration for one while addressing the other*. The expression *sustainable development*, with what comes across as a positive and optimistic attitude, focuses on their compatibility and the possibility of a balance between the two, rather than on their facets that might conflict. This idea of sustainable development *balancing* different objectives and needs is present in some literature [3–5] and grey literature [6, 7], albeit the objectives/needs to be balanced vary between sources – nature and human well-being [3], economy, society and environment [4, 7], economic growth, and environmental protection [5].

The definition of sustainable development offered by the well-known 1987 Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* – "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [8] – also revolves neatly around the idea of pursuing a reasonable balance, this time between present and future generations.

However, despite its positive attitude and neat definition, the concept of sustainable development is the object of several controversies, concerning both the concept *per se*, and its implementation – in particular, its implementation in the form of *Sustainable Development Goals* [9].

The understanding of these controversies and of the broad context of environmental-social issues in which they occur can be clarified and enriched using the environmental violence framework.

In Lee's [10] definition, environmental violence includes: (a) the violence between people(s) over natural resources; (b) environmental policies that can be violent against people; (c) the secondary violence from the natural world as a result of human degradation of the Earth; and (d) direct damage to the environment by humans that threatens their own survival.

From this point on, the notations (a–v. between people), (b–v. policies), (c–v. from nature), and (d–v. from damage) will refer to Lee's forms of environmental violence, which will be used in this chapter along with the components of the environmental violence framework proposed by Marcantonio, Lederach, and Fuentes: structural violence (e–structural v.), cultural violence (f–cultural v.), environmental violence as pollution (g–pollution), vulnerability (h–vulnerability), and harm and power differentials (i–differentials).

These forms (a–d) and components (e–i) of environmental violence appear to be linked to the concept of balance in two ways with opposite directions, because the lack of a reasonable balance can both cause and be caused by environmental violence. Indeed, the lack of a reasonable balance in the use, distribution, and care of the Earth and its natural resources, which can be considered a form of

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structural violence (e–structural v.), can cause violence between people(s) (a–v. between people) and can cause environmental damage resulting in secondary violence from the natural world (c–v. from nature), harm and power differentials (i–differentials), and increased vulnerability (h–vulnerability), even to the point of threatening human survival (d–v. from damage). Conversely, the lack of a reasonable balance itself can be caused by violence between people, for example, in the form of wars (a–v. between people) or be caused by structural violence (e–structural v.) in the form of environmental policies that can be violent against people (b–v. policies), for example, a government's decision to build a dam disregarding local people's concerns for the effects of the dam on the local socio-ecological systems.

At first glance, since sustainable development is focused on pursuing a balance – both between human needs and planetary limits, and between present and future generations of humans – this popular concept appears to be a step in the right direction both for the sake of reaching this balance itself, and for the sake of contrasting environmental violence. However, both the implementation of sustainable development and the concept of sustainable development itself are more complicated than they seem, and a deeper look into them shows that, while they can be part of the solution, they can also at times be part of the problem.

This chapter will start considering the issues with the implementation of sustainable development in Section 6.2, before moving on to a deeper discussion of the issues concerning the concept of sustainable development itself in Section 6.3.

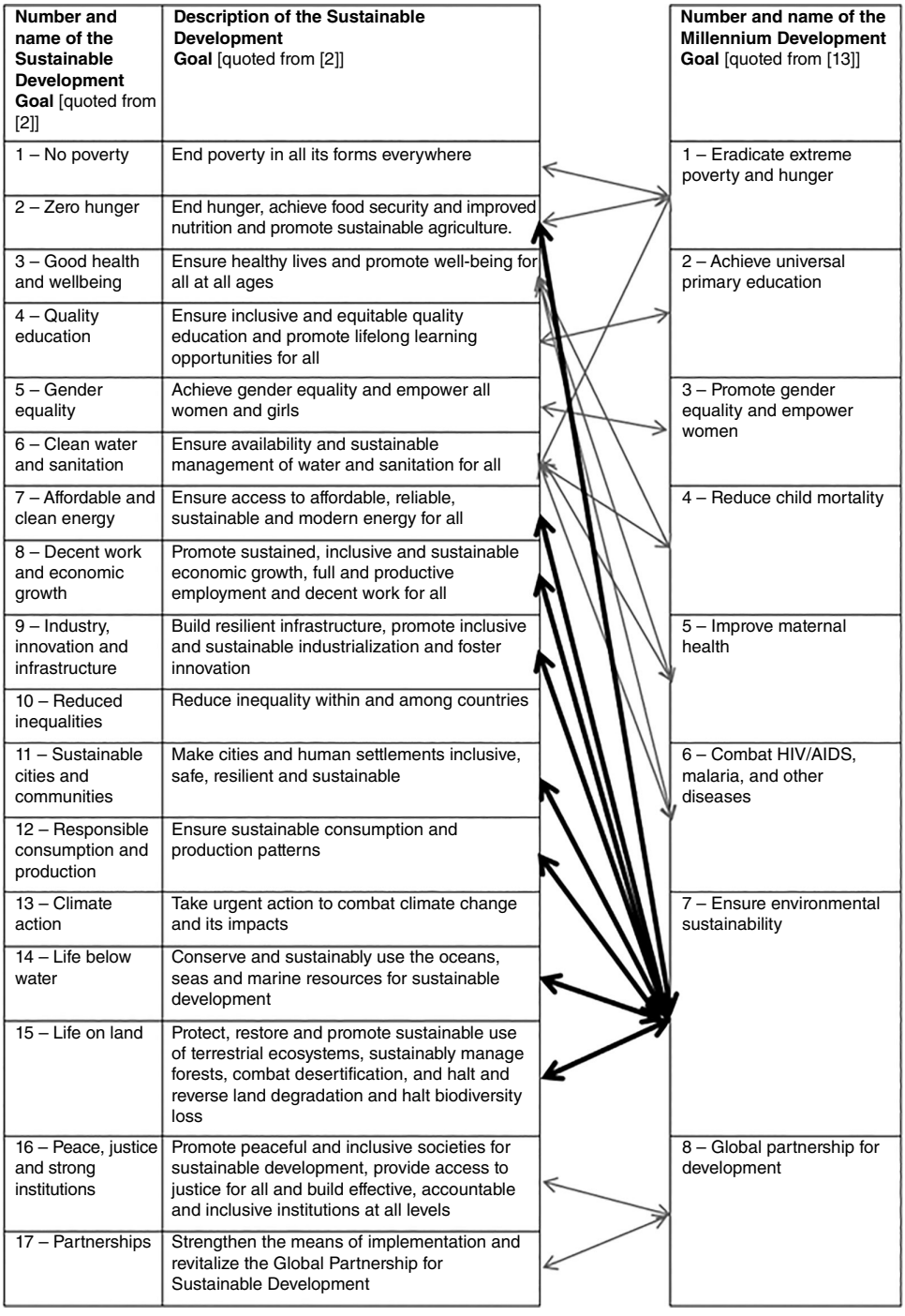
6.2 Issues Concerning the Implementation of Sustainable Development and Its Goals

The discussion on the issues concerning the implementation of sustainable development presented in this section revolves around one main aspect: the quality of the design of the agenda that has been developed and adopted internationally to put the concept of sustainable development into practice, the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. This agenda, adopted in 2015 by all the United Nations Member States [2], consists of 17 goals to be reached by 2030 [2] aimed at pursuing sustainable development.

The SDGs are considered a sustainability-oriented evolution of the former eight *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)* that originated from the 2002 United Nations Millennium Campaign [11]; they were centered on the idea of Human Development [12], were supposed to be reached by 2015 [13], and were only partially achieved [14].

The 17 SDGs are presented in table 1 of Figure 6.1, while the MDGs are presented in table 2 of the same figure. The arrows indicate the main relationships

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Number and name of the Sustainable Development Goal [quoted from [2]]	**Description of the Sustainable Development Goal** [quoted from [2]]	**Number and name of the Millennium Development Goal** [quoted from [13]]
1 – No poverty	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	1 – Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2 – Zero hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.	
3 – Good health and wellbeing	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	2 – Achieve universal primary education
4 – Quality education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	
5 – Gender equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	3 – Promote gender equality and empower women
6 – Clean water and sanitation	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	
7 – Affordable and clean energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	4 – Reduce child mortality
8 – Decent work and economic growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	
9 – Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	5 – Improve maternal health
10 – Reduced inequalities	Reduce inequality within and among countries	
11 – Sustainable cities and communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	6 – Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
12 – Responsible consumption and production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	
13 – Climate action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	7 – Ensure environmental sustainability
14 – Life below water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	
15 – Life on land	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	
16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	8 – Global partnership for development
17 – Partnerships	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	

Figure 6.1 Table 1: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, Source: [2];
Table 2: The Millennium Development Goals, Source: [13].
The arrows added by the author connect SDGs and the related MDGs

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between the SDGs and MDGs (weaker and more indirect relationships have not been represented, to avoid confusion). The thicker arrows highlight the links between various SDGs and MDG 7, *Ensure environmental sustainability*. The presence of many SDGs related to what originally was one MDG concerning sustainability shows that the SDGs are, indeed, a sustainability-oriented evolution of the MDGs with a broader and more detailed exploration of the environmental aspects of sustainable development. These goals are associated with 169 targets and 304 indicators [12].

6.2.1 The SDG Agenda: Issues Concerning Peoples and Politics

Concerning the quality of the design of this agenda, this abundance of goals, targets and indicators has been criticized, because it makes the SDGs a plan overwhelmingly complicated to follow [12, 15]. At the same time, despite this abundance of information, the vast majority of SDG targets have been accused of lacking clarity on *who should do what* [16], clear measurements [15, 16], and time frames [15], a characteristic that can discourage their implementation [15].

In terms of environmental violence, the issues shown by this design – especially the lack of clarity on who should do what – can directly or indirectly trigger unfair and violent environmental policies (b–v. policies, e–structural v.) and violence between people(s) directly or indirectly over natural resources (a–v. between people), exacerbating harm and power differentials (i–differentials). An example of this can be seen in the recurring disagreement, at the Conference of Parties (COPs) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), about how responsibilities and costs should be divided between countries, for example, in the case of the funding for loss and damage [17]. Another example of this is the broader upstream issue that the whole SDG/sustainable development approach is based on a Western idea of development, which makes it intrinsically disrespectful toward non-Western cultures (f–cultural v.), especially those that have been historically oppressed by violence through colonization – an issue that concerns the concept of sustainable development itself, and that will be developed in 6.3.2.1.

However, the most debated controversy concerning the SDGs is another one: the contradictions between the different goals and, at times, even within the same goal. For example, Herrera [21] points out implementation issues and contradictions within SDG 6, *Clean water and sanitation*, and between this SDG and other SDGs that can be pursued through the realization of dams and other water-polluting activities – namely, SDGs 7, *Affordable and clean energy*, and 9, *Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure*. Also, Scherer et al. [18], Spaiser et al. [19], and Swain [20] discuss whether or not the social SDGs are compatible with the environmental ones,

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finding that, while there are some solutions that can foster development and sustainability at the same time [19], working on social goals often implies increased environmental impacts [18], and concluding that "the SDG agenda will fail as a whole if we continue with business as usual" [19].

Indeed, one of the most important elements of the *business as usual* strategy is the pursuit of economic growth, which is part of the SDG 8, *Decent work and economic growth*. As Sengupta [12] argues, the SDG agenda does not answer the question "How are we to achieve sustained and inclusive economic growth while keeping in mind planetary boundaries?", thus leaving unaddressed one of the main issues within the concept of sustainable development, the *Issue of Economic Growth* (see 6.3.1).

To attempt to solve these contradictions internal to the SDG agenda, some authors have pointed out the need to establish priorities between different targets [21]; to prioritize those goals that also help the achievement of other goals, such as education [22]; and to understand these goals from a system perspective, as well as the constraints, trade-offs, and social processes they imply [23]. These solutions, especially the adoption of a system perspective, appear to be a step in the right direction toward the pursuit of a reasonable balance, a balance in which goals are pursued with consideration toward the other goals, and goals are prioritized based on what works for the system. This being said, the prioritization of goals that also help the achievement of other goals might, in the author's view, not be ideal because this would not necessarily ensure that the goals that are essential for the overall balance would be prioritized over non-essential ones.

Despite all these criticisms, it needs to be noted that the SDG agenda is the result of delicate negotiations among hundreds of countries and, thus, any change to them would need a lot of caution and be risky from a political perspective [15], potentially also resulting in violence ((a–v. between people), (b–v. policies), and/or (e–structural v.)).

Beside the controversies concerning the SDGs, the pursuit of sustainable development can pose challenges to the law of international trade [24] and can be more difficult, in general, to reconcile with the current policy, legal, and economic frameworks because of the "vagueness of the concept, the level of aggregation that is not adapted for pragmatic policy-making, the Western or Northern bias, and its voluntaristic and unrealistic view of the role of economic dynamics" [25]. The *Western or Northern bias* will be explored more in detail in 6.3.2.1.

6.2.2 Sustainable Development Goals and Technology

As we have seen, sustainable development revolves around a balance between human needs and planetary limits, while the definition of sustainable development

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proposed by the Brundtland Report [8] describes it in terms of a balance between the needs of present and future humans. Hence, sustainable development seems to revolve around two main pillars: humans and the environment. However, when it comes to the Sustainable Development Goals, that is, the implementation of sustainable development, some literature argues there is also a third key pillar: technology.

Indeed, when Hillerbrand [26] discusses SDG 7, *Affordable and clean energy*, she points out that the SDGs are based, not on two interconnected pillars only – humans and the environment – but on a third pillar as well, technology. According to Hillerbrand, the connections between society and technology have not been considered enough in the SDGs, leading to a failure in distinguishing between different kinds of technology, with the risk of falling into technological optimism or determinism.

Also, Sengupta [12] makes a discourse in which she seems to identify what can be considered an example of the issue presented by Hillerbrand [26]. Indeed, Sengupta [12] sees the SDG agenda as a missed opportunity, because it fails to support low-carbon solutions and to discourage high-carbon modes of production and consumption, and it tackles climate change with a technocratic approach, without stressing enough the links between SDG 13, *Climate action*, and the other SDGs.

If we add the environmental violence framework to the understanding of the relationship between humans, environment, and technology, we can see that technology can touch all of Lee's forms of environmental violence because it can be involved in conflicts (a–v. between people), policies (b–v. policies), and damage to the environment that can also have negative consequences for humans (c–v. from nature, d–v. from damage). In addition, the production, use, and distribution of technology can reflect power differentials (i–power differentials), cultural and structural violence (e–structural violence, f–cultural violence), as well as be associated with further increases in pollution (g–pollution). Furthermore, the more importance humanity attributes to technological development and the more dependent humanity becomes on technology, the closer humanity becomes to creating a fifth form of environmental violence: the prioritization of technology at the expense of both human well-being and the environment. In the author's view, as long as humans see technology as a means to improve their well-being or solve environmental issues and not as an end in itself, technology will, at most, be a contributor to environmental violence, which has only humans and the environment as causes and/or ends of environmental violence. However, the moment technology becomes an end to be pursued at the expense of human well-being and the environment, technology stops being a mere contributor, and becomes itself a cause and/or an end of environmental violence. The author does not see this additional form of

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environmental violence as a current reality, but as a direction humanity might be heading to, foreshadowed by some examples in which humans are already preferring more technological solutions, even when they come at the expense of human well-being and the environment. For example, the diffusion of smartphones (goods we lived comfortably without until not long ago) is linked to resource and people exploitation [27], including aspects that could be considered environmental violence. Also, Hillerbrand [26] and Sengupta [12] seem to implicitly suggest an example of questionable adoption of technological solutions, arguing that the use of technological solutions to tackle environmental problems might at times come at the expense of the big picture.

These reflections lead to the necessary addition of a caveat to Hillerbrand's reasoning: While considering three pillars – humans, environment, and technology – can help our analysis, the third pillar – technology – should not be mistaken as equal to the other two in importance or in role. Indeed, while sustainable development aims at taking care of both human beings and the environment, it is not aimed at taking care of technology, or supporting a certain level or type of technology. If we look at the essence of what sustainable development means, technology can play the role of a means to the pursuit of a balance between human needs and planetary limits, but it should not be an end in itself and, thus, it should come second, after the other two. This is important to keep in mind, as not doing so could jeopardize the pursuit of the delicate balance between human needs and planetary limits, as well as result in the fifth form of environmental violence described earlier.

6.3 Issues Concerning the Concept of Sustainable Development

As anticipated in Section 6.2, the issues concerning the SDGs and the implementation of sustainable development signal the presence of deeper, more theoretical controversies regarding the concept of sustainable development per se.

6.3.1 The Issue of Economic Growth

The debate about SDG 8, *Decent work and economic growth*, raises a deeper controversy about if and how *development* should include or imply *economic growth*.

As several authors point out (e.g., [28–30]), economic growth is simply incompatible with sustainability, because it implies an increased resource exploitation, which cannot be sustainable, especially in the long term. Moreover, some authors [30, 31] challenge the idea that growth is the solution to poverty and, consequently, argue that sustainable development and the SDGs should focus more on addressing inequality and poverty directly, rather than through an economic growth that may or may not lead to solving inequality and poverty issues. In fact,

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the pursuit of economic growth itself is considered a social and environmental problem – notably, by the Degrowth movement [32], but also people who argue in favor of similar concepts like *post-growth* [33] and *agrowth/growth agnosticism* [34] – that should no longer be encouraged and should instead be replaced with other, more sustainable and just ways of pursuing human well-being [32–34]. Interestingly, the direct pursuit of equality can be the solution to the environmental and social problems associated with economic growth – indeed, as it has been summarized in O'Neill's talk at TEDx Oxbridge [35]: "If growth is a substitute for equality, then equality is also a substitute for growth."

While, at first glance, economic growth might not appear to be linked to environmental violence, there are reasons to argue that the pursuit of economic growth does, in fact, plant some of the seeds that result in environmental violence. Before discussing how, a distinction is needed: Economic growth can be intended both at the overall global level, that is, the increase of the combined economy of all the countries, and at the level of the individual countries, that is, the increase of the economy of a country, usually mentioned when discussing *how a specific country is performing if compared to the others*.

If we consider the growth of the global economy, it is apparent how an economy that is following a path of growth is intrinsically at odds with the possibility of a balance between human needs and planetary limits, because the central point of such a path is to depart from a balance and strongly support human needs (and wants … and even further needs and wants that would be artificially created for the sake of supporting the economy) at the expense of the planetary limits. This can easily result in damage to the environment that can increase vulnerability (h–vulnerability), cause secondary violence from the natural world (c–v. from nature), threaten the human species (d–v. from damage), cause harm and power differentials (i–differentials), and/or lead to violence among humans (a–v. between people), as has happened historically with migrations and wars originally caused by natural disasters. Also, if we consider the possible fifth form of environmental violence, we cannot help but notice how the narrative of economic growth sees technological development as a key and desirable supporter of economic growth (e.g., [36, 37]), while in the literature there is even the connection between economic growth, technological development, and war [38].

Some – including the OECD and the UN [39] – have considered the possibility of *decoupling natural resource use and environmental impacts from economic growth* [40]; however, the evidence for decoupling is limited to some environmental impacts and geographical areas, rather than covering economic-wide resource decoupling at national or international levels [39]. This (lack of) evidence exposes the decoupling of economic goods and environmental bads as a *myth*, as Jackson calls it in his book, *Prosperity without Growth* [41].

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If we consider, instead, the growth of the economies of individual countries pursued for the sake of competitiveness against the performance of other countries, this can again result in dangerous damage to a country's land done for short-term performance at the expense of long-term resilience (c–v. from nature, d–v. from damage, h–vulnerability), but it can also result, more explicitly, in violence between peoples over the use of resources, for example, in the form of wars (a–v. between people) or structural violence (e–structural violence). Because of all these reasons, while economic growth is indicated as part of development, its implications appear to be, for a substantial part, at odds with it.

6.3.2 The Issue of the Roots of Development

Why is the idea of development – in general, qualitative terms – so intertwined with the idea of economic growth in specifically economic and quantitative terms? There are at least two possible related answers.

First, because one of the dimensions of sustainable development (and development in general) is the *economic* one (other dimensions are, according to Redclift [42], the *political* one and the *epistemological* one). While this does not automatically mean supporting economic growth, it shows how accustomed we are to considering the economic side of anything, and to considering the economic side as one of the key dimensions.

Second, because, as noted by Banerjee [43], our idea of development is rooted in modernistic assumptions of rationality, which divide human beings from the biophysical environment, reduce the various aspects of development to economic growth, and see economic instruments as the appropriate way to protect the environment.

If the deepest controversies within the concept of sustainable development – the pursuit of economic growth, the prioritization of technology – can be attributed to the use of a modernistic Western idea of development, then perhaps the solution to these controversies, and possibly other issues in sustainable development, might be found by leaving the idea of development open to discussion from different cultural perspectives. Indeed, another controversy surrounding the concept of sustainable development is *how development is defined*, *what it is rooted in*, and *how this idea of development represents – or does not represent – different perspectives*. This issue concerns the representation – or lack of representation or limited representation – of non-Western cultures in the concept and implementation of sustainable development, that is, what Bruyninckx [25] called *Western or Northern bias*. In this chapter, a notable – albeit not exhaustive – example of this will be discussed: the *Issue of Indigenous Representation* (6.3.2.1).

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6.3.2.1 The Issue of Indigenous Representation

The SDG agenda includes references to Indigenous peoples [44, 45], as the *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015* [46] mentions them in the political declaration and under SDGs 2 (*Zero hunger*) and 4 (*Quality education*) [44]. Also, the United Nations, in 2007, produced the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* [47], which include their "right to self-determination" [47]; their "right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture" [47]; and their "right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard" [47].

However, this does not mean that the concept of sustainable development, the SDGs, and their implementation are *adequately* and *respectfully* considering Indigenous peoples, their knowledge, their perspectives, and their actions aimed at pursuing sustainability. Indeed, the Indigenous Peoples Major Group has over the years made statements [48, 49] expressing serious concerns. A main concern is their frustratingly limited inclusion over the years in both the MDG and the SDG processes. As the Indigenous Peoples Major Group expressed in a 2015 statement:

> We are in merely 2 SDG targets. […] All other meaningful references over the course of the last year or more to the term "Indigenous Peoples" were a target for deletion.
>
> The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted in 2007 and we are now reaching the end of the 2nd International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, yet there still seems to be the need to defend the concept of Indigenous Peoples and our rights among some member states who questioned the relevance of our inclusion in this document.
>
> We remain concerned that if we are not explicitly and meaningfully referred to in the operative text of the SDGs, that we will encounter immense constraint and exclusion from the implementation and monitoring processes. Our experience with and invisibility within Millennium Development Goals supports this concern. Those goals also claimed to be universal. The Indigenous Peoples Major Group advocates for the over 370 million Indigenous Peoples worldwide and we insist those voices be heard and recognized throughout this document. [48]

Also, the Indigenous Peoples Major Group in a 2020 statement denounced violence that Indigenous peoples are still facing when protecting their lands:

> The criminalization of indigenous peoples when they defend their lands, resources and livelihoods is also worsening in many developed and developing countries. The land and resource grab and criminalization of indigenous peoples is expected to worsen when States implement their economic growth targets for recovery from the impacts of the pandemic based on resource extraction and profit generation. […]
>
> Indigenous peoples who are actively defending their right to the lands, territories and resources, and their right to express their critical views are being criminalized, arbitrarily arrested and detained. [49]

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Hence, despite the presence of a certain level of inclusion of Indigenous peoples, the situation seems to be far from one of fairness, inclusion, and respect; changes are needed, both in terms of improving Indigenous peoples' inclusion in the conversations on sustainable development and in terms of supporting them in their activities of protection of their lands.

One misunderstanding present in the implementation of sustainable development, and rooted more deeply in the concept of sustainable development itself, is viewing Indigenous people first and foremost as *vulnerable*, which is a limited and biased interpretation of reality that forgets about their right to self-determination [45]. Indigenous peoples should not be treated as mere passive receivers of help – they should be recognized and respected as agents and decision makers, have leadership positions in policy development [45], and be listened to and supported, rather than criminalized, when they defend their lands (implicitly stated in [49]). Indeed, Indigenous peoples are not just vulnerable peoples, they are also peoples whose cultures have to be respected and, in fact, have notable insights related to sustainable development.

The importance of Indigenous knowledge on sustainability has been proven and explored in the literature by various authors (e.g., [50–56]) sometimes referring to it as *Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)* [55] or *Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS)* [56]. One of many examples of their relevant insights is explained by Ole Sapit, who says that "Land for Indigenous Peoples is not just a means of production. It is an interactive space for us to engage with all of our livelihood options and opportunities" (reported by [45]). Another example is offered by the concept of *Buen Vivir* [51], which proposes "the idea of interdependence between society and nature and a conception of the universal as a plurality" [57]. Visions like these show an approach that does not see humans and environment as a duality with diverging needs and constraints that needs to be balanced, but as one interconnected system – a grasp of reality that shows a remarkable awareness and knowledge and, thus, should be acknowledged, listened to, and respected. Indeed, listening to these perspectives and forms of knowledge could lead to a less inconsistent idea of sustainable development, or to a different concept to pursue in lieu of sustainable development.

Moreover, Indigenous people "make up less than 5 percent of the population but manage more than one-quarter of the world's land surface" [58], and they do realize development initiatives on their own [59]. Hence, from a practical perspective, they are already playing a massive role in global sustainability on their own terms – a role that is massive regardless of whether it is aligned with the Western concept of sustainable development. Consequently, pursuing a Western idea of development is not only biased by economic ideas, but also partial, historically unfair, disrespectful and, in the end, counterproductive too, because it suffocates non-Western approaches.

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The pursuit of a Western idea of development is also connected to environmental violence, in ways that are related to, and even transcend, the four forms identified and the potential fifth one, related to technology, which is proposed in this chapter.

This happens because the popularity of a Western idea of development comes with very uncomfortable baggage: the fact that this popularity is due to historical colonization, which by its own nature, involves various forms of violence – from literal war, murder, imprisonment, and slavery, to less blatant, but still shameful, various forms of cultural oppression and everyday discrimination – practiced for the sake of controlling territories and peoples.

The popularity of a Western idea of development, the fact that this idea of development is considered the "standard" one, and the very idea that there should be a development in the first place is an expression of environmental violence associated with violence between people(s) over resources (a–v. between people); violent and unfair environmental policies (b–v. policies, e–structural violence); damage to the land that can cause secondary violence from the natural world (c–v. from nature) or threaten humanity (d–v. from damage); and a prioritization of technological development over human needs and environmental limits (author's fifth form of environmental violence).

More importantly, at a deeper level, the popularity of a Western idea of development also affects the very systems – cultural, political, legal, and social – that determine what is right and what is not, what is fair and what is not, what is violence and what is not – a clear case of cultural violence. This represents a transcendent, ultimate type of environmental violence: the imposition of a view, of a way of life, of a cultural and ethical framework to establish what is right and what is wrong over peoples that do not consent to it, oppressing them, their cultures, and their relationships with the land, while also damaging the land in the process – all for the sake of dominating peoples and lands. From the author's perspective, when the environmental violence framework proposed by Marcantonio, Lederach, and Fuentes is applied to the idea of development in a context of colonization, the "cultural violence" component emerges as the main driving force of environmental violence, and thus the most critical to understand and address. How should sustainable development be (re)considered in the light of all this?

6.4 Conclusion: From Sustainable Development to Sustainable Life

At the beginning of this chapter, sustainable development was described in terms of its essential components: the human–environment duality, the aspirational pursuit of a balance between human needs and planetary limits, and the relationship between the lack of such balance and the presence of environmental violence.

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Then, various issues in the concept of sustainable development and in its implementation have been discussed, also making references to environmental violence and the pursuit of a balance, when appropriate, in the author's view. In the light of this discussion, what are the main takeaway messages of this chapter?

First, one reason why the concept of sustainable development is so popular is that it summarizes very neatly the direction that humanity should take according to the mainstream cultural vision, that is, the Western cultural vision. However, just because this concept offers a nice summary of this desired direction – improving human conditions in a sustainable way – does not mean this direction is clear or reachable. In the case of sustainable development, the contradictions between some of the SDGs; the lack of clarity of many objectives; and the high number of objectives itself make this direction more confused than it originally appears. These issues can cause – unintentionally and/or intentionally – injustice, which can result in environmental violence.

Second, this direction relies too much on economic growth and technological development, goals that are, to some extent, at odds with the main purpose of sustainable development and can jeopardize it, while also creating the right environment for environmental violence to occur.

Third, this direction is, as already said under the first point, based on a Western cultural vision, and the very fact that this vision has been made mainstream at the expense of other peoples and cultures represents the ultimate transcendent form of environmental violence – a form of cultural violence that has been present for centuries, since the beginning of colonization at the hands of some European nations. Because of this, if any *fair* sustainable development is to be implemented, the goals, definitions, and measurements of its *development* component need to be reconsidered in the light of the cultures that have been oppressed and in general of all the cultures that have not been adequately represented so far, and the ways to achieve its *sustainable* component can and should also be informed by these cultures.

Fourth, this chapter began with the consideration that the term *sustainable development* nicely encapsulates human needs and planetary limits, with the imperative to not pursue one without consideration for the other. Based on the discussion that followed, this description needs two corrections.

The first is that if humans and the Earth are, in fact, one interconnected system – as highlighted by some reported Indigenous views – then the balance is not between *human needs and planetary limits*, but between *human and planetary needs*. This alternative definition shows, in the author's view, more respect and consideration toward the Earth because its environment is now, not only perceived as *something that can cater to human needs, but only within certain limits*, but as *a subject that has its own needs that need to be respected and met*.

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The second one is that in the expression *sustainable development*, *sustainability* and *development* do not seem to carry equal weight: *development* is the noun, while *sustainable* is an adjective attributed to that noun – hence, implicitly, the *development* component takes the lead role. This represents an issue, because – as we have seen – it is the *development* component, not the *sustainable* one, that presents the issues discussed in this chapter. Hence, while it would be difficult to argue that humanity should not live *sustainably* when the Earth is showing us that some of its planetary boundaries have been dangerously trespassed [60], it can, however, be argued that, since the mainstream idea of *development* proposed by sustainable development is problematic and not universally shared, we need to reconsider not only what kind of development we want, but also if it truly is mandatory to have development.

For this reason, this chapter suggests the replacement of the concept of *sustainable development* with the less debatable and more sustainability-oriented one of *sustainable life*.

A Concluding Message from the Author
You will move me that day too

Sitting on a rock
in the middle of a field
I was being enfolded
by a dancing gust of wind
turning and whispering
during its stay
then calling the leaves
and going away.

But it wasn't just a friend
or a travelmate
the background of a painting
or the shaking of a landscape
it was there, and it was energy
the sign of a life
that goes beyond mine.

A warm, vibrating life
of reassuring, solar light
a life that sometimes twirls
with fresh ribbons made of wind
and those brave waterfalls
that dive from the cliffs
in marvelous ponds
while the ocean currents every day
chase each other
in an endless game

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and the geothermal warmth
silently heats
the planet like a heart
does with its beats.

… but I am one of those irresponsible
and ungrateful human beings
that ignored so naively
all these energy gifts.
I am one of those tiny brains
who believed they knew it all
and I am one of those tiny lives
who thought every right belonged
to their own interest and pleasure
beyond any considerate measure.
I am one of those, indeed
who exhumed at a dangerous speed
coal, oil and also gas
buried treasures of the past
everything burnt in a blink of an eye
in a nearsighted capricious lifestyle.

… but awakening the dead is not wise
and neither is picking the same flower twice …

And now that the dream belongs to the past
a biased equilibrium is what is left
corpses scattered out of empty graves
new and unknown dangers to face …

What can I say?
What can I do?
I am the guilty to blame
I'm not allowed to complain
I can only stop and look around
then apologize stooping down
in the dustbin I shall throw the claims,
those huge requests that now I must pay
and I shall use, with respectful measure
the gifts spontaneously given by nature.
And in the end I shall listen to the speech
that is gently sung by the gust of wind …

… this gust of wind is messing
my hair and my soul …

This gust of wind says that a piece
of the Great Life
is breathing through me

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partly matter and partly soul
being humile and serious shall be my goal
energy is what I took
and what I will return back
the matter I am made of
shall not be wasted
now I am using it, but it's not mine
and now I feel I can talk
to the Great Life:

You don't belong to me
I belong to you
one day I'll come back to your arms
and you will move me that day too.

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