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# Buddhist Sustainable Development: A New Approach in Happiness and Development



Dr. Sauwalak Kittiprapas

# Introduction



Moving beyond the old development framework focusing on only economic indicators such as GDP, there are currently two important global issues in development: first, to move development towards happiness and well-being; second, to achieve sustainable development with the 2030 sustainable development goals (SDGs).

The uniqueness of this study is to link the issues of sustainable happiness and sustainable development. The issue of happiness and well-being is growing in importance among academic studies, development and policy designs. While a lot of studies on happiness so far have not focused on happiness in a more sustainable way, this book introduces happiness in Buddhism with the focus on inner happiness. By linking with inner happiness, sustainable development can be more

effective. This inner happiness focus in this study is a key difference from other sustainable development approaches.

Sustainable development has been a topic of discussion in development practices and theories for a long time. Since the industrial revolution, development has mainly focused on economic progress in consumption, production, and industrial growth together with technological advancement. Human and social development as well as the environment has not much received careful consideration, and all three have deteriorated. As human beings have experienced social, environmental, and psychological problems from development driven mainly by economic growth, there have been increased discussions on development directions and new paradigms for development. Sustainable development has become a topic of interest among development agencies.

Among major milestones in the sustainable development movement, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in June 1972, may be considered as the start of global concern towards the international environment.<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter, related UN organizations, as well as the World Commission, were established.

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<sup>1</sup> Summarized background and ideas on sustainable development from P.A. Payutto, 2006 (p.56-60),

This stream of consciousness has promoted international attention to environment-friendly development. At the same time, another stream of movement from UNESCO declared, in December 1986, “the World Decade for Cultural Development” (1988-1997) to focus on culture (related to human values) for development. However, it seems that only sustainable development, focused on the environment, has been popular within the active global movements and consequently a second global conference was organized in 1992, held in Rio de Janeiro. Environment economics has since become a subject of study in its own right, and seems to dominate the idea of sustainable development.

Meanwhile, the global environmental situation has been deteriorating, even though organizations all over the world have put in efforts to solve this problem. Over the last twenty years, there have been many active movements towards sustainable development. Since the 1992 UN conference in Rio, heads of states and governments adopted Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration; however, environmental problems have not been resolved effectively and have gotten worse. Obviously, there are still huge implementation gaps across the world in moving the sustainable development pathway forward. Upon reaching 20 years of implementation in 2012, Rio + 20 adopted “The Future We Want” to speed up campaigns of sustainable development with focus on green growth concepts and integrating economic, social and environmental aspects.

The UN General Assembly and related agencies have approved the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) after 2015. Although many UN and other development organizations have declared high priority to work towards SDGs, they are likely to focus on the old framework of green growth or quality growth with environmental friendliness.

Mainstream sustainable development framework covers economic, social and environmental dimensions. The Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN),<sup>2</sup> a global initiative for the UN in support of the SDGs, proposed a fourth dimension - good governance - to this framework, though, it relates to systems rather than human beings. However, that conventional idea, implemented globally, may need a rethinking because it still focuses on growth, and consequently ineffective to solve sustainable development problems. As environmental problems in global development today are largely driven by consumption-led growth, the development framework needs a new paradigm. There may be some missing elements in the sustainable development pathway that are more crucial than the four dimensions noted above which exclude human mind and spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> SDSN. *An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development: Report for the UN Secretary-General*. October, 2013.

In contrast to other sustainable development approaches, this study draws attention to the inner-human dimension as a critical factor for sustainable development and a starting point for change. Greater concern for living with nature is likely to be driven from spiritual or inner happiness obtained by wisdom directed towards understanding the interdependence of all kinds of living beings and nature, as well as promoting happiness from less use of resources and being more independent from physical materials.


In this regard, Buddhist principles and practices, focusing on inner happiness, well support holistic sustainable development. The inner happiness focused sustainable development may be called “Buddhist Sustainable Development”, driven by the “Buddhist sustainable happiness” path or happiness at high (mind and wisdom) levels. Payutto (1995; 2006) has indicated that Buddhist sustainable happiness can make sustainable development effective and can explain why the Western sustainable development pathway - which does not include sustainable happiness - has not been effective.

This study clearly demonstrates that to achieve the goal of sustainable development successfully, human beings must be happy with moderation and be consciously willing to preserve environment and resources for future generations. That is why the Buddhist development approach discussed in this paper has to relate to the issue of happiness, insightfully. Moreover, the study relates to external factors such as right environment (i.e., the social and economic system) surrounding peoples’ lives as supporting conditions for their

Buddhist practice and Buddhist way of life, which can reinforce sustainable development. Consequently, the study offers a new development paradigm focusing on human-mind development as a critical factor to drive sustainable development.

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## Concluding Remarks



There are many recommendations for sustainable development as this issue has been a subject of discussion in development for a long time and nowadays Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) becomes a global agenda. While the mainstream sustainable development framework is likely to focus on environment and resource management - the supply side of sustainable development, the BSD discussed in this book focuses on consumption management – the demand side - which is more difficult to control. While other approaches focus on physical resources and relate to resource availability, this approach discusses the subjective aspects of development inside the human mind and relates more to human behavior.



**By focusing on human behavior, the book suggests a holistic approach for human mind development, as a foundation for sustainable happiness for all; and has proposed a new sustainable development concept, called Buddhist Sustainable Development (BSD). This approach places the emphasis on human development together with right views towards happiness, life and nature. Human beings can live happily with moderate consumption, in cooperation and harmony with society and nature, as well as sharing for equitable resource distribution. This provides holistic development for human wellbeing physically, mentally, and intellectually.**

As explained in earlier Chapters, BSD with a human development focus can increase subjective wellbeing of individuals, and through its contagious effects, leading to societal happiness and sustainability. **Therefore, human development with emphasis on inner happiness is an additional key element to the existing economic, social, and environment elements of the mainstream sustainable development framework.**

The sustainable development goals may be difficult to achieve as long as individuals remain normally concern for their own happiness (at a low level). Unless people are taught and developed and become able to enjoy their inner happiness, they would not sufficiently care for others or future generations. That is why Buddhist sustainable development through inner happiness stresses the path for a higher level of happiness, which can result in a change in human behavior and consequently sustainable development goals could be achieved.

**BSD is derived from the Buddhist concept of human mind development, assuming that human beings have the capacity to strive for greater happiness with less exploitation, leading to a sustainable path of development as well as living in harmony and peace. The definition for BSD is proposed as:**

*Buddhist Sustainable Development driven by human-mind development with inner happiness, resulting in moderate consumption and less exploitation of natural resources as well as increased compassion towards humans, other beings and nature.*

Although the Buddhist sustainable development approach with the above definition may not relate directly to the resources availability for future generations, this path of human behavior would ultimately result in sustainability through harmonious living of all beings on earth (in any generation) over time.

*“This book serves as a guide for finding solutions to unsustainable development, which is a means to foster global development—to nurture the world we live in—and, at the same time, to develop human happiness.”*

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacharya (P. A. Payutto)

*The uniqueness of this study is to link the issues of sustainable happiness and sustainable development.*

*It highlights key essential features of Buddhist happiness and Buddhist economics concept for development and the differences as compared to the conventional development model.*

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