

BOOK REVIEW

REFRAMING SUSTAINABILITY IN THE AGE OF SDGS

Jeffrey D. Sachs, The Age of Sustainable Development (New York, Colombia University Press, 2015), pp. 544

Jeffrey D. Sachs, the US guru of sustainable development, has put all his optimism into his latest book *The Age of Sustainable Development*. The book was published last March with a foreword from the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon. Sachs leads the Harvard Institute for International Development and Columbia University's Earth Institute. He wrote an internationally renowned and highly cited paper on public health, poverty, and the environment. Aside from his academic reputation, he is also a 'street' activist. He participated in Occupy Wall Street to deliver his neo-classical ideas.

Through his years of work in public health, economics and the environment Sachs argues that sustainable development is a deceptively simple idea, where we should manage the world's affairs so as not to destroy the place for our children. However, since the notion of sustainable development became a touchstone for international policy-makers about 30 years ago, it has become mired in confusion. In the introductory sections, he also argues "sustainable development is a normative or ethical view of the world to whom current generations deliver wellbeing for its citizens today and for future generations."

Sachs insists that sustainable development is an academic discipline to understand the world as a complex interaction of economic, social, environmental and political systems. This new academic discipline attempts to combine

an academic approach with an ethical stance to help sustainable development experts and policy makers create policy recommendations. Aside from experts and policy makers, the target audience of this book is students, activists and environmentalists.

Overall, the book uses material Sachs prepared for a global online course on sustainable development (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/sustainable-development>). The course aims to address the complex challenge of assuring a continued rise in prosperity, in the remaining poor parts of the world, whilst at the same time avoiding roadblocks such as the depletion of fresh water, high air and water pollution, the loss of biodiversity, and extreme climate change. This book review will attempt to give a brief overview of each chapter.

Sachs starts his chapter by providing the definition of sustainable development. He states "As an intellectual pursuit, sustainable development tries to make sense of the interactions of three complex systems: the world economy, the global society, and the Earth's physical environment. How does an economy of 7.2 billion people and \$90 trillion gross world output change over time? What causes economic growth? Why does poverty persist? What happens when billions of people are suddenly interconnected through markets, technology, finance, and social networks? How does a global society of such inequality

of income, wealth, and power function? Can the poor escape their fate? Can human trust and sympathy surmount the divisions of class and power? And what happens when the world economy is on a collision course with the physical environment? Is there a way to change course, a way to combine economic development with environmental sustainability?" As a normative approach, sustainable development means a good society has to be a good steward of the natural environment.

In next chapter Sachs highlights some facts about economic growth and income equality over time and across countries at a point of time. Sachs emphasizes three major aspects of sustainable development: economic development, broad-based social inclusion and environmental sustainability; all supported by good governance. But what do we mean by economic development? How do we measure it and what is the state of play in today's very complicated and diverse world? There are many different dimensions of economic development and therefore many measurements are needed to assess a country's development process. Nonetheless, we tend to rely heavily on a single measurement called the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country. In this chapter Sachs debates whether GDP is a good indicator of national well-being. He also points out another critical point about measuring GDP. Larger countries have more people and more workers and therefore produce more. If we simply compared countries in terms of the total production, we would find that highly populated countries have higher production, but we would not know whether the living standards of the larger countries are really higher than those of the smaller countries that produce less in total but more per person. One of the most important questions he raises in this chapter is whether or not today's poor countries have the chance or are on a path to closing the large gap in GDP per capita with high income countries as well as improving the other indicators of wellbeing.

In chapter three, Sachs begins in the years before 1750. It was the time before the industrial revolution started, when the nations of the world were at a state of fairly equal

income levels. About 250 years later, vast gaps in income between the rich and the poor nations have opened up. The steam engine enabled new forms of transport, including steam-powered railroads and steam-powered ocean freighters. Increased energy also allowed a far greater scale of industrial transformation of materials than ever before. The production of steel soared, which in turn made possible the massive expansion of cities, industries, and infrastructure of all kinds. The transformation of life was dramatic, and often traumatic. The economic development started in England, spreading across into Western Europe and other nations, reaching Japan by the late nineteenth century and finally to the postcolonial world after World War II. There are still a few places where modern economic growth has not yet reached. These are generally places facing great geographical difficulties. They include places far in the interior of continents, high in the mountains or isolated, distant islands.

Sachs writes a remarkable chapter on *Why Some Countries Developed While Others Stayed Poor* that discusses how poverty reduction and economic growth can reach those places that have still not benefited from the era of modern economic growth. Sachs presents his argument in from a geographical perspective. He points out that physical geography is the fourth item on the poverty diagnostic checklist, however, practitioners often overlook this basic reality as a contributor to poverty. From his experiences he reaches the conclusion that tropical countries are generally poorer than temperate-zone countries. Disease burden and crop productivity may help to account for such differences. Landlocked countries are generally poorer than coastal countries. Countries facing the hazards of earthquakes and typhoons, such as the Caribbean and the Asia-Pacific rim (e.g., the Philippines) seem to pay a long-term price for their vulnerability. Moreover, he notes that a billion people are still trapped in extreme poverty and offers a seven-item poverty explanation list that includes; the poverty trap, bad economic policies, financial insolvency of the government, physical geography, poor governance, cultural barriers and geopolitics. Demography issues

are also covered in this chapter. High fertility rates have a detrimental effect on economic development, with very large populations of young children, poor families have a difficult time providing the basics for all of their children. Perhaps only the eldest son is able to go to school, and the younger girls are married at a very young age without having attained a proper education. In the next generation, those young girls will grow up without the literacy and the skills they need to improve their own lives, and their own children are also likely to grow up in poverty. In the last part of the chapter, Sachs advocates for courage and optimism and lays down a challenge to the reader saying history and geographical burdens are not fate; they are not destiny; they are reasons for action.

The World Bank's poverty line is certainly the most widely used measurement. It defines extreme poverty as an income below a poverty line of \$1.25 per day, measured in U.S. dollars at the international prices of 2005. By this measure, there were an estimated 1.2 billion people below the extreme poverty line as of 2010, the year of the most recent data. Sachs argues with Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) to define it better as the ability of individuals to meet basic material needs. Chapter five enlists the eight Millennium Development goals (MDGs) that include; eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat infectious disease, ensure environmental sustainability and a global partnership for development. He shows the image of lights on at night around the globe taken from space by NASA. The picture illustrates how the absence of electrification has been a chronic barrier to Africa's development and is another aspect of the poverty trap. The absence of electricity means productivity is very low. Low productivity means low output per person, which in turn means low income and thus poverty.

Sachs performs a vital intellectual service as he defends the benefits of economic growth and counters the old environmentalist argument that economic growth must end. He also

strongly advocates the discussions of social inclusion and education for all in two separate chapters. He focuses on investments in the less fortunate and states that the potential solution for the inequality challenge is to expand access to education. On health issues, he presents data on life expectancy. Sachs rejects the easy inferences from such cross-national data; "Get rich and get healthy as well. But that would be a mistaken interpretation. The fact that very small changes in the income of the poor can lead to huge changes in health outcomes suggests an alternative interpretation; that modest but targeted investments in public health for poor people can make a profound difference for their health outcomes."

On the issue of Food Security and Climate Change, within half of the chapter Sachs stresses the challenges of feeding more people. The current food supply, already under so much stress, is going to be even further stressed by countries with rising incomes adding more meat to their diets, which in turn amplifies the demand for feed grains. As population pressures and urban areas increase the next major challenge are the environmental threats that will make it harder to grow food in many places of the world. These environmental threats and changes come in many shapes and forms, including changes to the climate (Mandherson & Dinar, 277-293). For many parts of the world these changes will be highly adverse for food production. It will mean rising sea levels, coastal lowlands that are farmed right now will be threatened. Places on the deltas of the great rivers, like Bangladesh, may be inundated by floods or even permanently submerged. To a layperson, reading this chapter may create a feeling of hopelessness that the individual farmers in these nations have no coping strategies for dealing with the serious challenges they face.

Since most of the world live in cities, it is important to answer the question of what makes a city sustainable. Sachs uses a three fold approach (according to the three dimensions of sustainable development). Sustainable cities are economically productive, socially (and politically) inclusive, and are environmentally sustainable (Pande, 2011). He

provides a prescription to create a resilient and sustainable city in this chapter. However, do urban and national leaders have the incentives to implement his agenda?

Chapter thirteen, discusses how in the current state, biodiversity is being reduced, degraded, and hugely threatened across the planet. For many reasons, this will be extraordinarily difficult to bring under control. This chapter places the challenges of ocean pollution and deforestation at center stage. Although this is an important issue to discuss, it seems like the idea to put it into publication is thirty years too late and the scope of discussion is too broad. In the last two decades, micro studies into natural resource depletion have provided detailed facts and alternative solutions. Thus, this chapter about the complex threats to biodiversity and ecosystems seems shallow and naïve in the face of one of the world's biggest problems.

Sachs' book comprehensively covers the triple "E" of sustainable development; economy, equity and the environment. The book explains the underlying causes of poverty, pollution and

inequality and attempts to find solutions. However, these solutions will not be enough, to reach an age of sustainability. It will take more than that; we need an urgent call for a clear political narrative to guide the current development stream to complement the optimism produced by this book.

SYARIFAH AINI DALIMUNTJE

Researcher, Research Centre for Population, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI). Email address: syaro08@lipi.go.id

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