



Timeline for Sustainable Development

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Dear Friends,

This month, we shall discuss in brief, the history of Sustainable Development, starting with the publication of the book, *Silent Springs*, the first UN Conference on Human Environment in 1972, followed-up by setting up of the Brundtland Commission, 10 years later by the [United Nations Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar](#) in December 1983. We shall provide you with the principal milestones in this history as a ‘Timeline for Sustainable Development’.

i. We are grateful to Rachel Carson for her book ‘*Silent Spring*’ (1962); as it drew the attention of the entire world on the adverse environmental effects of indiscriminate use of pesticides.

Garret Hardin in his article on ‘*Tragedy of the Commons*’ (1968) pointed out the danger of depleting or spoiling common ecological resources like the atmosphere, oceans, rivers and other water bodies, fish stocks etc. through individual actions prompted by self-interest. You may recall how the excessive use of chemical fertilizers has led to building up of nitrogen on ocean waters, killing all marine life.

ii. The year 1972 saw 3 major developments: the UN Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm. And publication of 2 reports: *Blueprint for Survival* in Ecologist and Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* report. The then Prime Minister of India, Smt. Indira Gandhi also addressed the conference, and you may read her address at: <http://lasulawsenvironmental.blogspot.com/2012/07/indira-gandhis-speech-at-stockholm.html>



Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, addressing the conference. Together with other leaders of the developing world, Gandhi singled out poverty as the main cause for environmental degradation and demanded greater responsibility and development aid from the industrialised countries.

It is good to quote briefly from her address:

“One cannot be truly human and civilized unless one looks upon not only all fellow-men but all creation with the eyes of a friend. Throughout India, edicts carved on rocks and iron pillars are reminders that 22 centuries ago the Emperor Ashoka defined a King's duty as not merely to protect citizens and punish wrongdoers but also to preserve animal life and forest trees. Ashoka was the first and perhaps the only monarch until very recently, to forbid the killing of a large number of species of animals for sport or food, foreshadowing some of the concerns of this Conference. He went further, regretting the carnage of his military conquests and enjoining upon his successors to find "their only pleasure in the peace that comes through righteousness".

She cautioned, “It will not be easy for large societies to change their style of living. They cannot be coerced to do so, nor can governmental action suffice. People can be motivated and urged to participate in better alternatives”.

She concluded her address with:

“It has been my experience that people who are at cross purposes with nature are cynical about mankind and ill-at-ease with themselves. Modern man must re-establish an unbroken link with nature and with life. He must again learn to invoke the energy of growing things and to recognize, as did the ancients in India centuries ago, that one can take from the Earth and the atmosphere only so much as one puts back into them. In their hymn to Earth, the sages of the Atharva Veda Chanted-I quote,

"What of thee I dig out, let that quickly grow over, Let me not hit thy vitals, or thy heart".

iii. A decade later, the Brundtland Commission was formed by the UN Secretary General in Dec. 1983, with a view to rallying countries to pursue together, sustainable development. The commission defined sustainable development as:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"

The commission finished its term in 1987 and published its final report titled, “Our Common Future”. This publication won the [University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award](#) in 1991.

iv. Two decades later in 1992, we had the Rio Summit. A significant outcome of this summit was the formation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC organized annual follow-up meetings to review progress made in tackling climate change issues, amongst all member states. These meetings are known as Conference of Parties (COP) and starting with the first meeting (COP 1) in Bonn in 1995, we have an unbroken series of such meetings with COP 25 being scheduled in early December 2019, in Chile. The year 1988 saw the formation of the IPCC (Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change) by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). IPCC provides periodic assessment reports on climate change to UNFCCC.

The COP 3 in Kyoto in Japan (1997) culminated in signing of the Kyoto Protocol. All developed nations agreed to reduce their respective national emission of Green House Gases (GHGs) from the levels in 1990 by a certain percentage.



In between, several other global conferences were held, as under:

World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993)

International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994)

Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (Bridgetown, 1994)

World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995)

World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995)

World Food Summit (Rome, 1996)

The history of global sustainable development efforts has always been full of controversies, and the Kyoto Protocol may be cited as a good example. The protocol intended to curb GHG emissions by the developed nations who accounted for more than 90% of the accumulated GHGs in the atmosphere. But countries like USA and Canada walked out of the agreement, citing current comparable levels of GHG emissions of developing nations, mainly China, India, Brazil and others. Although poverty was identified as a principal barrier to sustainable development (as pointed out by our PM way back in 1972), there was reluctance amongst the rich nations to share the financial burdens of reducing poverty. On the whole, there was more talk than results.

At the turn of the millennium, we witnessed the United Nations Millennium Summit (New York, Sep. 6-8, 2000). Our PM Sri Atal Bihar Vajpayee addressed the summit on Sep. 8th. He opened his address with:

“Standing at the gates of an important epoch at a point in our history that joins the past and the present and the future we the representatives of six billion people must ensure that this Millennium Summit and the General Assembly session that follows will transcend issues of narrow concerns and chart a new course for humanity. And that will lead to enduring peace, development and security for all”.

He concluded with an ancient Indian invocation:

*Sarve bhavantu sukinah
Sarve santu nirmayah
Sarve bhadranipasyantu
Ma Kaschit dukha bhag bhavet!*

*(May all live happily
May all enjoy good health
May all see auspiciousness
May none experience distress
May peace prevail everywhere!)*

- v. This summit adopted a ‘Millennium Declaration’. This declaration included defining a set of 8 global goals to reduce global poverty levels to 50% of the status prevailing in 1990, over the next 15 years, till 2105. These came to be known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

- vi. While the controversies around sustainable development continued, overall, the MDGs were a success story. We shall discuss it in detail in the next month. The success of the MDGs accompanied by the publication of the scientific findings of the nine planetary boundaries, led to the formulation and adoption of a much more ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 for the period Jan 1, 2016 to December 31, 2030.

This is in brief, the history of Sustainable Development so far.

Thank you.

