



“Summary of article by Vandana Shiva: Recovering the Real Meaning of Sustainability” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 86-88

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The term "sustainable" entered the economic development lexicon in the 1980s when people began to realize that economic growth and continuous increases in per capita income were unsustainable. Instead of living up to its promise to alleviate poverty, economic growth actually undermined ecological stability, thereby destroying people's livelihoods and causing further poverty. Moreover, development strategies have been based on the growth of the market economy, even when large numbers of people operate outside of this network. The emphasis on the market economy has resulted in the destruction of the other economies of nature's processes and of people's survival, but this destruction is seen as nothing more than the "hidden negative externalities" of the development process.

The principles of ecology and survival that maintain and sustain life in society have been neglected as the market and man-made capital have been elevated to the position of the highest organizing principle. However, modern economics and concepts of development are only of recent origin in the history of human interaction with nature. Before the advent of modern economics, humans derived their livelihood directly from nature through self-provisioning mechanisms based primarily on the principle of sustenance. Under this system nature was regarded as a commons. Under the market system, on the other hand, nature is viewed as a resource and is exploited to increase profits and capital accumulation. Processes of nature and society that are outside of the market system are not valued, leading to the destruction of nature and of the material base for people who live outside of the market system. Thus the emphasis on market related and market driven activities, undertaken in the name of economic development, has led to underdevelopment and scarcity in the economies of nature and survival.

Sustainable development is being offered as a solution to the ecological crisis that has resulted from economic growth and commercialization. Unfortunately this concept is still embedded in the ideology of the market system, resulting in the loss of the real meaning of sustainability. It is argued that more growth - resulting in greater use of natural resources and higher capital investment - is needed to solve the crisis at hand. The problem with this approach is that it separates the ecological problems from the economic problems. Strategies of economic growth lead to the destruction of nature, exacerbating economic problems. The most widely advocated sustainable development strategy suffers from three flaws:

- 1) it assumes the primacy of man-made capital;
- 2) it separates production from conservation, making conservation dependent on capital; and
- 3) it assumes the substitutability of nature and capital.

To understand the real meaning of sustainability we must realize that nature's economy is primary and the money economy depends on it. The growth of markets and the resulting destruction of nature are at the root of the sustainability crisis. To have truly sustainable development, production and conservation should not be viewed separately, and ecological principles must be incorporated into the production and development processes. Furthermore, the notion that man-made capital and nature are substitutable must be abandoned. While it is true that man-made capital is created from natural resources and life, the reverse cannot take place.

In conclusion, the word sustainable can have two meanings. The real meaning refers to nature's and people's sustainability, where nature supports life. The second meaning is the sustainability of the market and the production process, but this path cannot be followed forever as it destroys nature, which is the primary source of support and sustenance.