

From 3 pillars to 17 goals of sustainable development (Unpublished work paper)

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Abstract

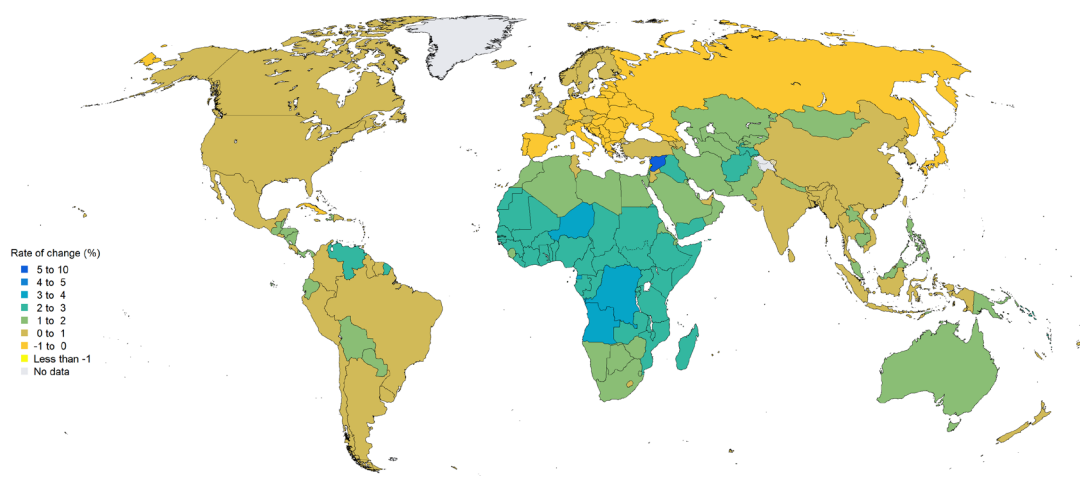
Sustainable development as an exhaustive concept has long and miscellaneous history. The first known writers have expressed their worry about the damages people cause to nature as early as in the 5th century B.C. However, the raise of Christians and the belief that all the nature was subjugated to man and placed at his disposal suppressed the critical discussion for more than 18 centuries. It was only at the Age of Enlightenment, when the biblical relationship between man and nature was seriously questioned by Enlightenment philosopher. Within the next two and a half centuries, there were only handful of writers arguing about the relationship between man and nature. The true discourse was started in the late 1960s after some several disasters and partly with the voices of famous protest singers. Their songs were directed not only against the pollution and abuse of the nature, but they song also about the social and societal evils such as racism and poverty. March towards the 17 goals of sustainable development presented by United Nations Development Programme had begun.

This paper will present some milestones of this march and discuss whether the contemporary ways to present the hierarchy of the goals are sufficient. A completing, but not necessary alternative, way to see the goals, their hierarchy and the relationships between goals and surrounding world will be presented. Goals should not be seen as disconnected topics, that are freely striven for, according to one's own ambitions, but as a network, in which each node should be taken into account to be able to aim a sustainable solution. For example, on point of view of sustainability it is not worth fighting against climate change if the only thinkable solution increases inequality.

Introduction

Within the past few years, both scientists, many politicians and ordinary people have expressed their worry about the climate change and greenhouse effect. The average temperature of the Globe has arisen, threatening e.g. the polar and mountain glaciers. The global rise of the average temperature is widely acknowledged, but the reasons for this are continuously argued. Although there is a strong consensus concerning the impact of man on the greenhouse effect (United Nations, 2019), also the opposite opinion has a strong defense supported by conservative financial and industrial circles (Bohr, 2016). At the same time, the growth of the population has continued (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2019). Parallel with the population grows poverty, because the growth of the population is fastest in the poorest countries (Figure 1). Hungry, lack of clean water, contaminated soil and poor quality of education or even missing education are problems, that are generally connected with most of the poorest countries in addition to fast growing population.

Average annual rate of population change (%), 2020-2025 (medium-variant projection)



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Figure 1 Speed of population growth (Source:<https://population.un.org/wpp/Maps/>)

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Changing climate is more than only the rising temperature. Increased number of storms and rainstorms, floods, and on the other hand droughts and sandstorms, all of them being distributed roughly, have been connected to Climate Change. All these natural disasters are treating worst the poorest countries who does not have resources to reserve the incidents nor capability to acts of rescue (Kyte, 2014). Thus, fighting against Climate Change is not the magic key which would solve all the problems that the concept “Sustainable development” is trying to tackle. Despite of this, it has been found, that the term “Sustainable development” is often stamped on the actions that are directed only against the climate change, plastic in the seas, equality or some other single environmental or social problem, and where the hidden motivation is to save the business if the continuity is endangered by the changes in environment, demand or markets, or if the reputation is endangered (Gasbarro, et al., 2017).

Taking into account the sustainable development in the daily work of enterprises, universities and other higher educational institutes, and governmental and municipal organizations, does not include only the worrying about the climate chance and the carbon footprint although these are the most often seen activities with which the institutions reason that they are following the principles of sustainable development. Single actions against climate change, e.g. changing diesel cars to electric ones, have an important symbolic sense, but they are not fulfilling the holistic nature of the concept “Sustainable development” (Sinakou, et al., 2019), which requires that both the societal, social, environmental and economic aspects should be taken into account.

Let us take another example. According to Bocken & al. (2014) a route towards a sustainable economy could consists

1. system that encourages minimizing of consumption, or imposes personal and institutional gaps or quotas on energy, goods, water, etc.
2. system designed to maximize societal and environmental benefit, rather than prioritizing economic growth,
3. closed-loop system where nothing is allowed to be wasted or discarded into the environment, which reuses, repairs, and re-makes in preference to recycling
4. system that emphasizes delivery of functionality and experience, rather than product ownership
5. system designed to provide fulfilling, rewarding work experiences for all that enhances human creativity/skills
6. system built on collaboration and sharing, rather than aggressive competition.

Although the study of Bocken & al. approaches the designing of sustainable business plan, it is a good example about how those 17 goals of sustainable development should be included into daily operational planning. It is almost impossible to combine all the goals in one case. It is not required either. But depending the context in which the United Nation’s model of sustainable development is applied, all the relevant goals should be covered. This means that the wider in terms of volume, product range and operational phases (design, purchase, production, sales, after sales) the business of a company is, the wider selection of goals should be applied. A company working in administrative branch, e.g. bookkeeping, has more to worry in equality and transparency than in workplace safety or clean water, whereas an oil refinery should be very interested in workplace safety, clean water and climate change, without forgetting the other topics.

The success in reaching the goals can be measured by sustainability assessments and indicators. In addition to common assessment tools and indicators, there are plenty of tools and indicators developed to meet needs of different branches and purposes (Whitehead, 2017), e.g. to assess sustainability of beef raising, wine yards or oil refining plants, or to prove the sustainability of new public project (Bond, et al., 2012). Sustainability as a political concept is contextual and connected to branch and purposes. However, sustainability as a scientific and ethic concept should be more clarified and unambiguous. When discussing the sustainability, we should be able to make sure that topic and subtopics are understood in same way by all the participants.

Although there is not yet any political or scientific consensus on a definition of sustainable development, the concept has occupied its place as universal political concept, like democracy, justice, and liberty. And, like

democracy, sustainable development is desired, ambiguous, diversely understood, extremely difficult to achieve, and irreversible. (Holden, et al., 2014) However, there are writers who state that the sustainable development concept has lost its relevance in political argumentation and policy making (Holden, et al., 2014). The comprehensiveness and complexity of the definition makes the concept confusing and difficult to understand for both the politicians and people voting them. It is argued that sustainable development as a concept is no longer useful in guiding policy making and that the concept is in danger of becoming irrelevant (Holden, et al., 2014). Thus, on this point of view, too, there is an emerging need to sharpen and clarify the definition and concept of sustainable development.

This paper will approach the concept of sustainable development by having a brief look at the history of concept, presenting some ways how the concept has been described and illustrated earlier, and presenting a new way to see the hierarchy of the 17 goals of sustainable development

History

Pesustainability

The needs of a mankind and their impact on the environment have been a constant subject of discourse throughout human history (Figure 2). Even the ancient urban civilizations, e.g. in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greek and Rome suffered environmental problems such as pollution and desertification which could today be referred as sustainability problems.

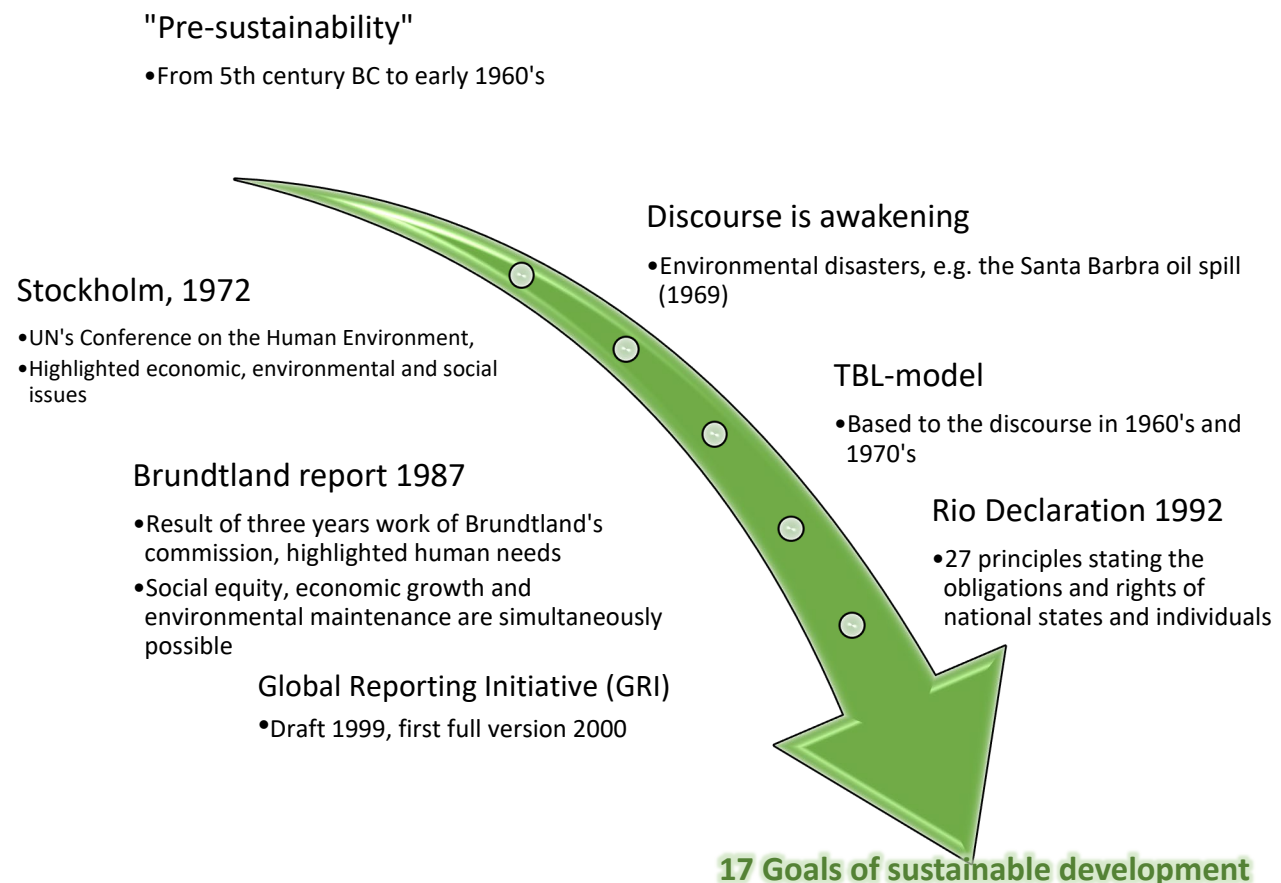


Figure 2: Developing the concept of sustainable development (Compiled from Purvis (2019) and Du Pisani (2006))

The probably first literary remarks concerning man's worry about the state of the environment can be found from the texts of Plato in the 5th century BC, and Strabo and Columella in the 1st century BC. (Du Pisani, 2006) Although there were some authors who were worried about environmental degradation caused by human

activities in the pre- and early Christian era (e.g. Pliny the Elder and Varro in the 1st century AD), (Du Pisani, 2006) the raise of Christians and the belief, inherited from Judaism (Vogel, 2001), that all the nature was subjugated to man and placed at his disposal (Hand & Van Liere, 1984) suppressed the critical discussion for more than 18 centuries. It was only at the Age of Enlightenment, when the biblical relationship between man and nature was seriously questioned by some of the Enlightenment philosopher, like Rousseau and Voltaire. Within the next two and a half centuries, there were only handful of authors reporting the damages caused by increasing mining industry and usage of wood and arguing about the relationship between welfare of man and welfare of nature. Most of the Enlightenment philosophers still agreed the connection between Christian view of life as a progress, and modern, empirical, and exact science and were convinced that science was the golden gate to the future. Instead of or parallel with God, it was science that would give humankind mastery over nature. (Du Pisani, 2006)

During the 18th century the population growth and increasing consumption of resources became as a topic of discourse. The most known author in concentrating to this theme was Thomas Robert Malthus, who stated in 1798 that because it threatened to outstrip food production the increase in population had to be restricted (Malthus, 1798).

In the 19th century, coal replaced wood as most important source of energy, which raised worries about the adequacy of coal deposits. It was calculated that English coal reserves would be run out within a century and England would lose the dominant industrial position she had. Sparing the fuel was found to be most recommendable. (Jevons, 1866) In Continental Europe German Rudolf Clausius and others highlighted the non-renewable nature of the natural resources (Van Zon, 2002)

John Stuart Mill wrote in Principles of political economy, published in 1848, that he was wishing that the population of the world “will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it” (Mill & Laughlin, 1885). George Perkins Marsh, on his part, wrote that people have forgotten that the earth was given for use only, not for consumption, and even less for wasteful use (Marsh, 1867) He highlighted the different areas of the natural environment that had been disturbed by human activity and stated that the Earth might become unviable for human. He also suggested solutions for environmental problems. However, it was not for the nature Marsh wanted to stop the profligate behaviour, but for the sake of humankind. (Marsh, 1867) This approach is very close to the idea of sustainable development. Alfred Russel Wallace (1898) summarized the development of the 19th century and stated that damage done by the reckless destruction of the stored-up products of nature was “plundering of Earth”, and considered the unlimited consumption of oil, gas, coal and minerals, and the utilization of the rain forests as an “*injury done to posterity*”. The themes are not so far from themes of Brundtland Report of 1987 nor the themes of sustainable development.

The dawn of the sustainability

It is not possible to specify one exact moment, when the concept “Sustainable development” saw the dawn. The first half of the 20th century was split by two world wars and several smaller conflicts. Between and after these people concentrated on reconstruction and the surviving was the most characteristic idea of that era. However, the fast rebuilding and intensive urbanization and industrialization caused unforeseen environmental problems, and latest in the end of 1960’s – due to several big environmental disasters – the state of the environment was an important topic in the societal discourse (Du Pisani, 2006). During the 1950’s and 1960s continuously intensifying civil right movement in USA (Hall, 2005) and the strengthening left wing sympathies in Western Europe (Bornschiefer, 2010) on their part highlighted the social issues in the societal discourse of that era. One of the most remarkable moments was the Conference of United Nations on the Human Environment in Stockholm 1972. In this meeting the environmental issues were connected to economic and social topics, and the collaboration between countries emerged as a way to solve these questions (Sohn, 1973). The concept created in Stockholm was first named as “environmentally sound development” (Purvis, et al., 2019), and founded a base for sustainable development. In the same year, 1972, the term sustainability was connected to balance between environmental issues and economic growth in the report Meadows & al. (1972) wrote for Rome club: “*It is possible to alter these growth trends and to establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that is **sustainable** far into the future.*” Parallel with these two concepts had also third piece in the puzzle emerged into

discourse: Sustainable society. According to Purvis & al. (2019), the proposal for the creation of sustainable societies was first published in *The Ecologist* in 1972, but the term was in use at least in 1970 when I.W. Gunn defines the sustainable society as a society that *lives within the limits of its environment, sustaining itself on the earth's ecological interest, and not its capital* (Gunn, 1970). Thus, it was already in very early phase of the discourse when the sustainability, societal, economic and environmental issues were connected together.

Three Pillar model

This connection was very soon visualized as three pillars bearing the sustainable development (Figure 3). It is not exactly known who, and when, draw the first illustration, but the image of “three pillars” spread quickly in the discussion. It is worth noting the semantic difference between the words “societal” that is derived from “society” used by Gunn, and “social” used in the first known visualizations of concept “Sustainability”: Although one sense of social is “related to society” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2020), the term has also other context-dependent meanings.



Figure 3: 3 Pillars of sustainability according to Purvis, Mao & Robinson (2019)

The usage of separate elements was found to be too simplifying (Gibson, 2006), and the next model consists of three partly interlaced circles (Figure 4). Although this model shows clearly the dependency of factors on each other, it does not describe the hierarchy between the factors, and furthermore, it includes ambiguous term “social”. Parallel image consists of three concentric – or layered – circles presenting environment, society and economy (Figure 5). This model tries to present both the dependencies between elements and the relationships between them, but how should it be read? Is the topmost element, the economy most important, or do the size of each element describe their importance? Or should the figure be interpreted so that environment is the base that enables the founding of sustainable society which on its turn is a requirement for sustainable and balanced economy? But it is also reasonable to state that a well-being society needs a balanced economy. And what about the social dimensions of both economy and environment. Are they forgotten?

Each of these three presentations, used both in scientific presentations and policy papers, leaves space for interpretations and various highlighting depending to the aims of usage. Although the conceptual origins of these descriptions, as well as the point at which it emerged into the mainstream, cannot be proved exactly, and its exact sense is ambiguous and confused by competing terms, it can be stated that the three-pillar conception of sustainable development is a dominant interpretation within the literature (Purvis, et al., 2019).

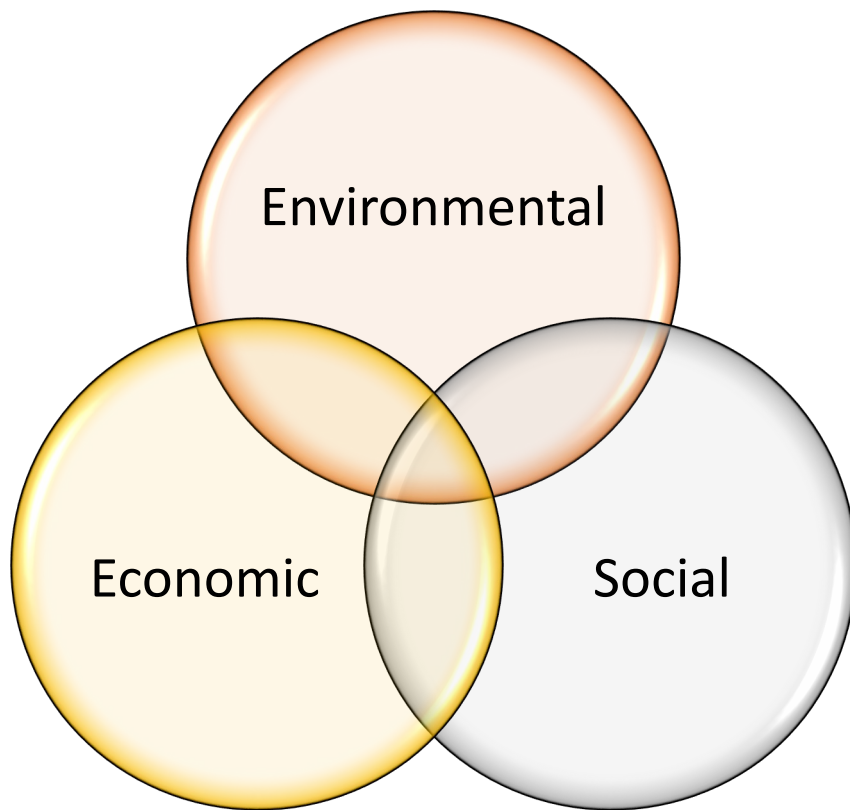


Figure 4: TBL (3 pillar) model of sustainability (Traditional model of sustainable development concept) according to Purvis, Mao & Robinson (2019).



Figure 5: An alternative presentation of Sustainability according to Purvis, Mao & Robinson (2019).

Stockholm Declaration

The Conference of United Nations on the Human Environment in Stockholm 1972 and the meetings of the Club of Rome¹ were probably the first wide international meetings in which the environmental issues were on the agenda. As stated above, the concept created in Stockholm, first called as “environmentally sound development” (Purvis, et al., 2019), is considered to have founded a base for sustainable development. The elements of this concept were (Stradling, 1972):

- Human activity impacts on the environment. The impacts can be beneficial or harmful to the nature and to physical, mental and social health of man.
- In the developing countries, the growth of the population, the ignorance and poverty are the major reason for environmental problems, in the developed countries, environmental issues are mainly caused by industrialization and technical problems.
- The social progress and the advance of production, science and technology increase the capability of man to improve the environment. Knowledge, wisdom and collaboration all over the world are key terms in the improvement process.
- Protection and improvement of the environment affects both the well-being of peoples and economic development and should be duty of all governments.
- Common outlook and principles should be found
- Economic development should be reconciled with environmental integrity (This was commonly thought to be impossible)

In the conference 24 principles were declared. These principles can be considered as a base for international environmental legislation (Brunnée, 2009). Recognizing the interdependency between human and the environment and highlighting the human being’s right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, as well as his responsibility on the state of nature, the principles emphasized the duty of the states and governments to protect both the resources of the earth and the life in all its forms by all means, including the education (Wright, 2002). The declaration was one of the first documents in which the rights of future generations were acknowledged and both inter- and intra-generational equity amongst humans as well as social and societal issues and the importance of sustainable economy were discussed. However, the declaration is also criticized to be too concentrated to the rights of the human being instead of the rights of the nature (Wright, 2002).

Tbilisi Declaration and two competing theories

The next big conference, Tbilisi Conference in 1977 and its results, known as Tbilisi Declaration, has been paid less attention to. The conference was hold in Soviet Union, and the declaration approached mostly the educational issues. The Tbilisi Conference was the first conference connecting the education and environmental issues in the spirit of Stockholm Declaration. After this, several conferences approaching the educational issues in context of sustainability and environment were hold and declarations were published (Wright, 2002). We will return to these in the next paper.

The silence surrounding the Tbilisi Declaration may partly be due to the conflict between Western countries and Soviet, called “Cold war” that in 1950s had brought up two competing theories concerning the relationships with developing countries (Figure 6). Soviet Union and its alliance utilized the widening gap between developed and developing countries, that had its roots in the colonial period, and the dependency theory to strengthen its influence in the developing countries. The dependency theory, based on Marxist analysis, stated that Western development based on the active oppression and exploitation of the developing countries. The theory highlighted

¹ The Club of Rome was founded in 1968 to solve the crises facing humanity and the planet. Based to the collective know-how of scientists, economists, business leaders and former politicians, it aims to find comprehensive solutions to the complex, interconnected challenges of the world. It has published several reports, the first of which was “The Limits to Growth”, published in 1972. (<https://clubofrome.org/>)

the economic domination of the western capitalist system and argued that the western centres of money and power maintained the control over the developing countries as a heritage from the colonial age. As a result of the exploitation the gap between rich and poor should widen all the time. It was suggested that the developing countries should cut off their connections to capitalist countries and follow an autonomous, independent path of development, based on socialism. (Du Pisani, 2006)

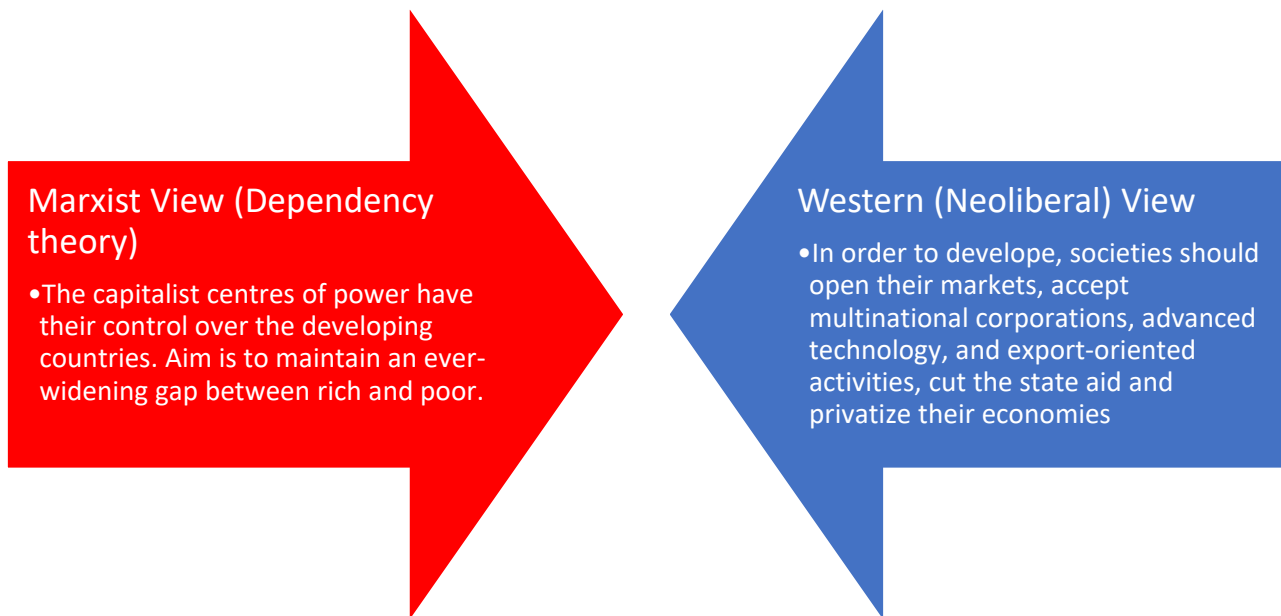


Figure 6: Two opposite views according to Du Pisani (2006)

The competing theory, Modernization theory, was based on liberal values and stated that the developing countries should clone the western model of development and modernize their societies by implementing the features of the developed countries. The Modernization theory saw the development meaning adopting the mental models, the institutions, the goals, and the culture of the western, developed countries. Free enterprises and the market economy were seen as positive elements of the progress. It was proposed, that developing countries should open their markets, welcome and support multinational corporations, apply and utilize advanced technology, stop all kind of national subsidies and totally privatize the economy. After this had been done, more prosperity would have spread around the globe, which will in turn would have fed the economic growth and modernization in developing countries. (Du Pisani, 2006)

Brundtland Report and different ways to interpret it

If there were no international or national regulation constraining the exploitation, this would have given the global corporations free hands to exploit the national treasure (oil, minerals...) of developing countries, and would just have increased the poverty. Furthermore, requiring to adopt the strange, western culture proves, that those defending the modernization theory had no understanding concerning the sense of cultural issues nor respect for the other cultures. Both views were challenged during the work of Brundtland Committee (Brundtland, 1987), and in its final report published 1987 (Known as Brundtland report), the highlights were in global co-operation, common goals, and working together to guarantee future generations' right to a healthy, life-enhancing environment. The report discusses about sustainability of ecosystems and connects together sustainable development, sustainable economy, (moderate) economic growth, environmental, social, societal and cultural

issues and overpopulation. Thus, in the Brundtland report all the pieces of sustainable development can be found. However, it took still 5 years until the discussion woke up (Figure 7): It was just after the Rio Conference in 1992, when the number of published researches and papers began to grow.

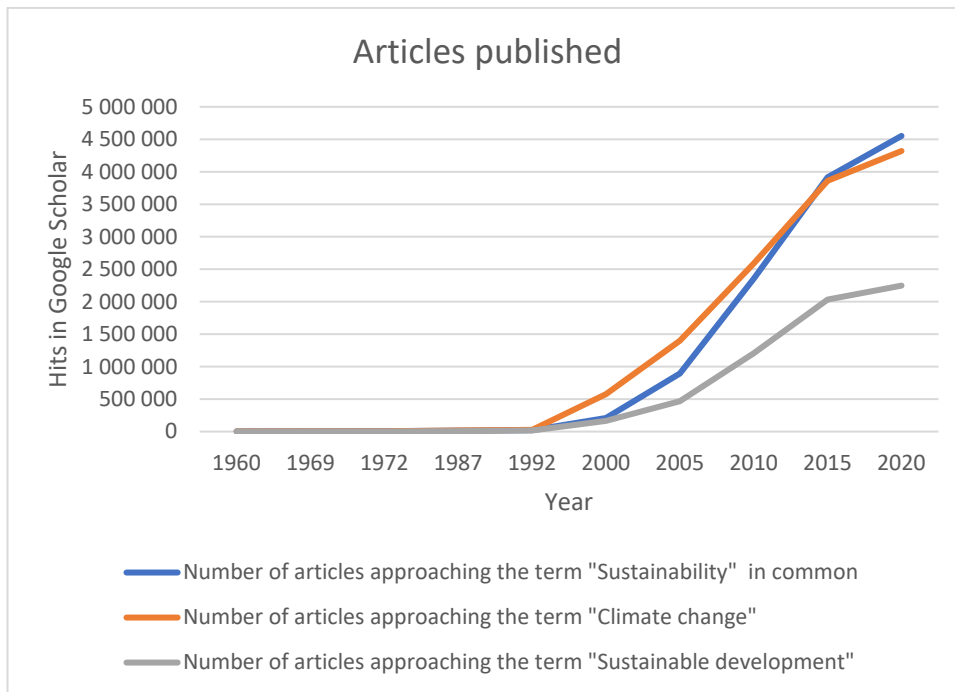


Figure 7: Published articles approaching the term "Sustainable development"

According to some writers, e.g. Daly (2007), Höyer (Höyer, 2000), it can be found two levels of dimensions from the Brundtland report (Figure 8): Primary dimensions that are connected to ecological, societal and social sustainability are safeguarding long-term ecological sustainability, satisfying basic human needs, promoting intragenerational equity and promoting intergenerational equity (Holden, et al., 2014). Daly (2007) states that these dimensions are unnegotiable, fundamental, and objective values, not subjective nor depending to personal preferences or valuations.

In addition to these primary dimensions, a number of secondary dimensions were identified, including e.g. preserving nature's intrinsic value, promoting protection of the environment, promoting public participation, and satisfying aspirations for an improved standard of living (or quality of life). The secondary dimensions should – according to Höyer (2000) – be subordinated to the primary dimensions. This means, that, for example, if basic human needs (surviving, reproduction...²) are threatened, the goals of secondary dimension, e.g. preserving nature's intrinsic value, should yield. Höyer also derived, that satisfying aspirations for a better life should be subordinate to safeguarding long-term ecological sustainability. Considering that "Satisfying aspirations for a better life" would be connected to economic growth, Holden & al. (2014) contended that economic growth is not one of the primary dimensions of sustainable development, which is contradictory with both the Brundtland Report and the "triple bottom line" model presenting the balance between environmental, social, and economic issues. It is worth bearing in one's mind, that in Brundtland Report, the economic growth itself is considered to be necessary for sustainable development, but the growth should remain on sustainable level, like Holden & al. also note.

² What are considered to be basic human needs, is another question. Maslow presented his theory on hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), in which he divided the needs into five levels: Physiological, Safe and security, Social (or Love and belonging), Self-esteem and Self-actualization. Although Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" has been challenged, it is a good way to conceptualize the problem: Which of these five levels should be considered to be basic human needs, or can we pick up some needs from one level and some from another levels?

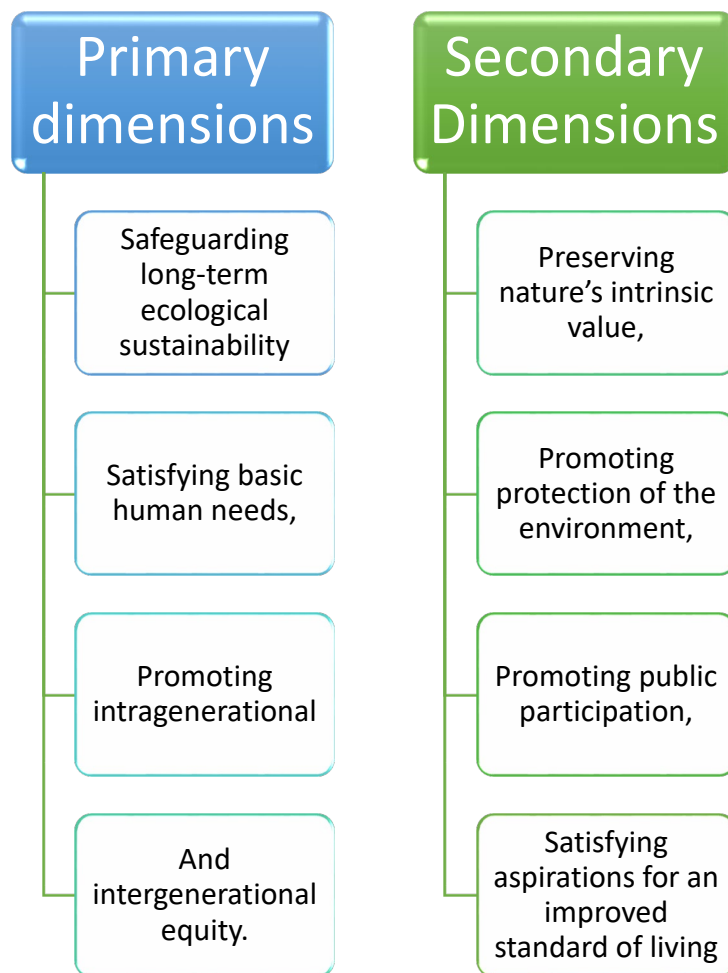


Figure 8 Dimensions of Brundtland Report according to Daly (2007), Höyer (2000) and others

Can it be found a hierarchy of the primary dimensions, and what should be done if there are conflicts between the issues connected to primary dimensions? In the discussion concerning these topics both the ecological sustainability, known also as “narrow sustainability”, and a much wider scale of topics forming the framework for sustainable development, including political, social, economic, and cultural issues, are emphasized. The last named approach is called “broad sustainability”, and is what mostly is considered to be the sustainability referred by Brundtland Report (Holden, et al., 2014). The contemporary habit to highlight certain topics like climate change could be counted as Narrow sustainability.

Another way to approach and to classify the sustainability was presented in 1991, just before the Rio Conference by Peter A. Viktor (1991) who stated that sustainability is strong, when the deployment of environmental resources caused by economic growth is in balance with the growth of these resources, i.e. consumption does not exceed the yearly net production of the environment (Figure 9). If the consumption is allowed to exceed the yearly result of the environment, the sustainability is weak. In such case, consumption exploits the unrenueable resources of the earth, the environmental capital. Turner (1993) spread the range of views from very weak sustainability to very strong sustainability. According to Turner, these two opposing positions can be traced to the techno-optimists and their techno-centric perspective (very weak sustainability), and to the deep ecologists and their eco-centric perspective (very strong sustainability).

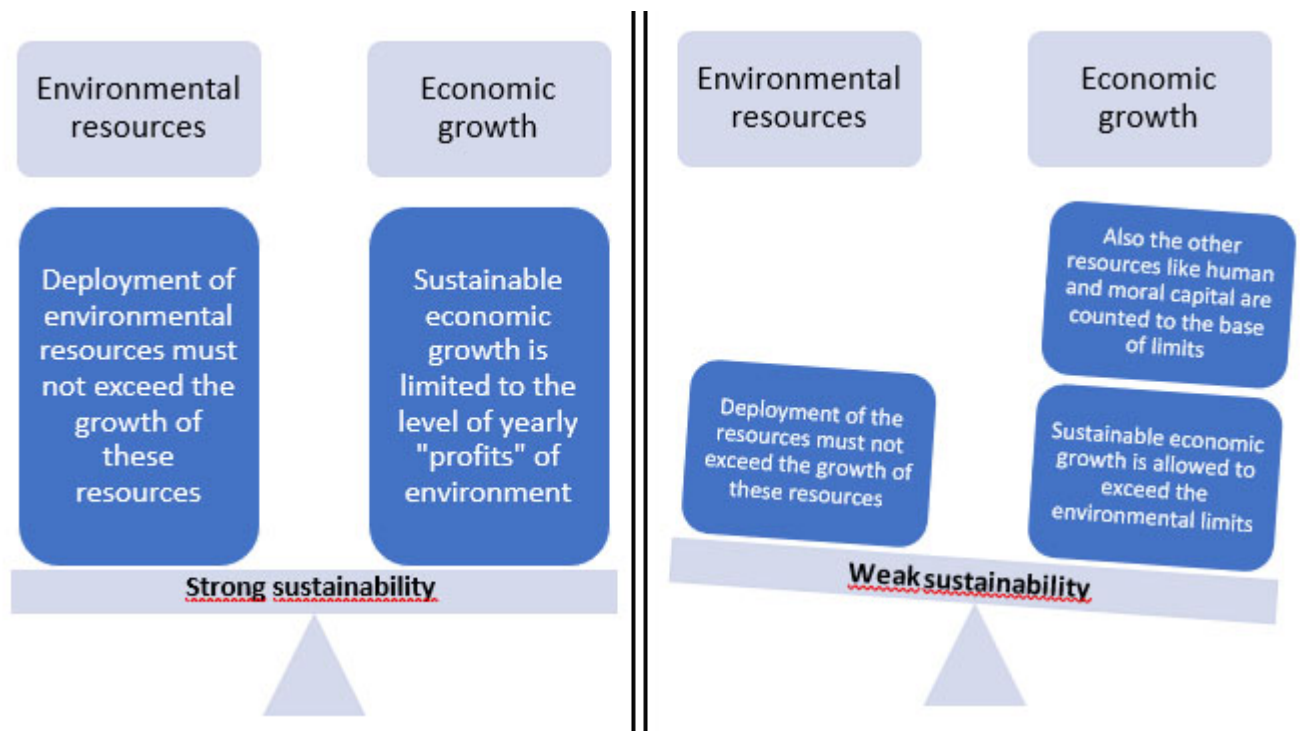


Figure 9: Strong and weak sustainability according to Holden & al.

The Rio Conference and Rio Declaration in 1992

The institutionalising of the concept 'sustainable development' continued with the 'Rio Process', initiated at the 1992 Conference in Rio. Central to the entrenchment of the principle of sustainable development was the publication of the 27 principles aiming to guide future sustainable development, known as Rio Declaration, and Agenda 21 which contains a plan for setting these principles into practice. Agenda 21 was based to the Brundtland Report and highlighted the problems caused by the division into developed and developing countries. The Agenda supported economic growth and free trade, and focused attention to the need to link social, societal and economic development with environmental protection (Purvis, et al., 2019). In the Rio Conference the causal connections between poverty, environment, economy and markets were described in a way that was closer to the modernization theory but had also acknowledged some issues from the dependency theory (Figure 10).

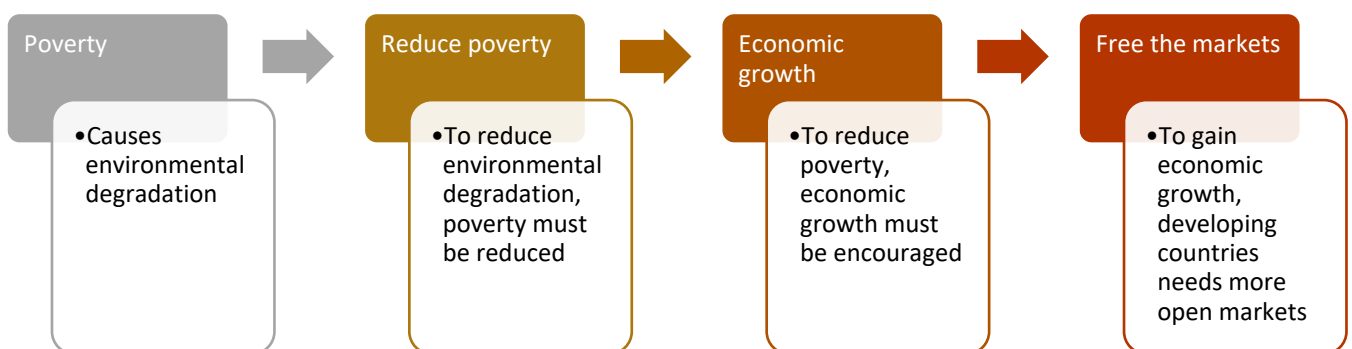


Figure 10: Assumptions behind the UN's approach according to Purvis (2019)

Nevertheless, it can not be considered as a compromise between two competing models.

It was at the latest in and after the Rio Conference when most of the national decision makers, politicians and governments in developed countries realized, that sustainability is not a bypassing phenomenon, but something they should pay attention to. The same challenge met also the enterprises, who, in principle, were responsible on most of the exploitation of unrenovable resources of the earth, on big part of the pollution and who always searched the most cost-effective ways to produce, lowest work cost, and who were even prepared to pay millions in bribes to guarantee the most profitable terms for business.

Global reporting Initiative GRI

The original idea of global standardized environmental reporting, that emerged from a confluence of the consumer, investor and shareholder activism during the 1970s, developed parallel with progress in environmental and sustainability politics during the 1990s. The increasing prominence of the notions of corporate social responsibility, civil regulation and private governance were an important part of this development. New ideas, among these also those presented in Rio Summit 1992, appealed to different groups of societal actors, and many of them joined into the process that finally lead to the birth of GRI.

The core of the ideology behind the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) can be derived from the philosophy of the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies, Ceres (known until 2000 as CERES, that is considered to be a parent organisation of GRI). Ceres is a coalition of investors, public pension trustees, non-governmental environmental organisations, foundations, public interest organisations, and labour unions. Although it is founded in 1989, Ceres has its roots in the consumer, investor and shareholder activism of 1960s. In addition to this, the development of Ceres has strongly been impacted by the corporate social responsibility movement of the 1990s. (Brown, et al., 2009) The mission of the coalition is to improve environmental performance and accountability among business in the USA by encouraging socially responsible investments, promoting shareholder activism, and by seeking voluntary but verifiable commitments to codes of conduct known as Ceres Principles (<http://www.ceres.org>). (Brown, et al., 2009). Ceres was directly involved in the foundation of GRI by administrating and funding the first phase of Global Reporting Initiative (Willis, 2003).

The process started officially in 1997 when several concept papers produced by five working groups were published. In 1998, GRI was accepted as a partner institution of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This enhanced its position, and enabled access to funding as well as administrative and intellectual support given by Division of Technology, Industry and Economy of UNEP. A year later, in 1999, the organization behind the GRI published the first draft of the GRI Guidelines (Sustainability Reporting Guidelines Exposure Draft) at an international conference at Imperial College London. Immediately after that, a pilot test programme was launched. In the beginning of 2000, a GRI Interim Secretariat was established to manage daily administration of GRI. The first official edition of GRI Guidelines was published in June 2000. (Brown, et al., 2009) Contemporary version of Guidelines consists of six standards: three common standards and three topic-specific standard series³. The common standards are 101 – Foundation, 102 – General Disclosures and 103 – Management Approach. Specific series are 200-serie for Economic issues, 300-serie for Environmental issues and 400-serie for social issues. (GRI, 2020)

At the moment, 93% of the world's largest 250 corporations are reporting on their sustainability performance. However, this does not mean that GRI is only for global corporations. Sustainability reports are released by companies and organizations of all types, sizes and sectors, and all over the world. Huge number of companies, public authorities and non-profits across all sectors have published reports that reference the GRI Standards. (GRI, 2020)

³ In addition to GRI-standards there are a number of other standards connected to environmental issues, e.g. ISO 14000-family, and also the other standards like ISO 9000 -family contain issues inked to environmental or social issues.

The 17 goals of sustainable development

In September 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) after two years of negotiations, launched after the Rio+20 Conference (20 years anniversary conference for Rio Declaration 1992) in 2012 (Sindico, 2016). Being built on the principle of “leaving no one behind”, the new Agenda highlights a holistic approach to achieving sustainable development for all. The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint showing a way to follow the agenda. They are targeted to the global challenges the mankind has, particularly those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. All the 17 Goals are interconnected, and all of those should be gained. (UN, 2020) The birth of sustainable development goals can be considered as a direct continuum for Stockholm Declaration, Brundtland Report and Rio Declarations (1992 and 2012) (Sindico, 2016). In this, latest, version of sustainability, the holistic approach is, however, emphasized more than any of the predecessors.



Figure 11: 17 goals of sustainable development (source:www.undp.org)

The birth of 17 goals was not self-evident. It took 2 years negotiations to gain a consensus between the 193 member states of the General Assembly (Unerman & Bebbington, 2018). Big role in these negotiations was played by two negotiating tracks: The Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the origin in the decision taken at Rio+20, and the agreement to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were drafted following the 2000 Summit, with a post-2015 development agenda (Chasek, et al., 2016). There were also other conferences and declarations in the background, like Johannesburg 2002 (Unerman & Bebbington, 2018).

It is also worth mentioning, that in addition to SDG-process presented above, there was a parallel process, launched in 2011, that culminated to Paris Agreement and the accompanying COP Decision in December 2015. Although the Paris Agreement and SDGs have same roots, they have different weightings, and thus, they are not copies of each other. Sindico (2016) states that three kinds of reference or approach to sustainable development can be found in the Paris Outcome. First, the concept of sustainable development is presented as the context in which climate change action and support should operate. Second, sustainability considerations are present throughout the Paris Outcome in relation to measures aimed at mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Thirdly, some further linkages between the content of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, like adaptation and loss and damage, can be found in the operative part of the Agreement, and others, like the importance of oceans, ecosystems, and food security, in the preamble to the Paris Agreement.

Dimensions of Brundtland Report vs 17 Sustainable Development Goals

Brundtland Report is considered to be as a source of contemporary concept of sustainable development. Comparing the dimensions of Brundtland Report to 17 SDGs proofs that there are certain similarities, but also differences between these two models (Figure 12). In SDGs the social and societal aspects and the holistic view

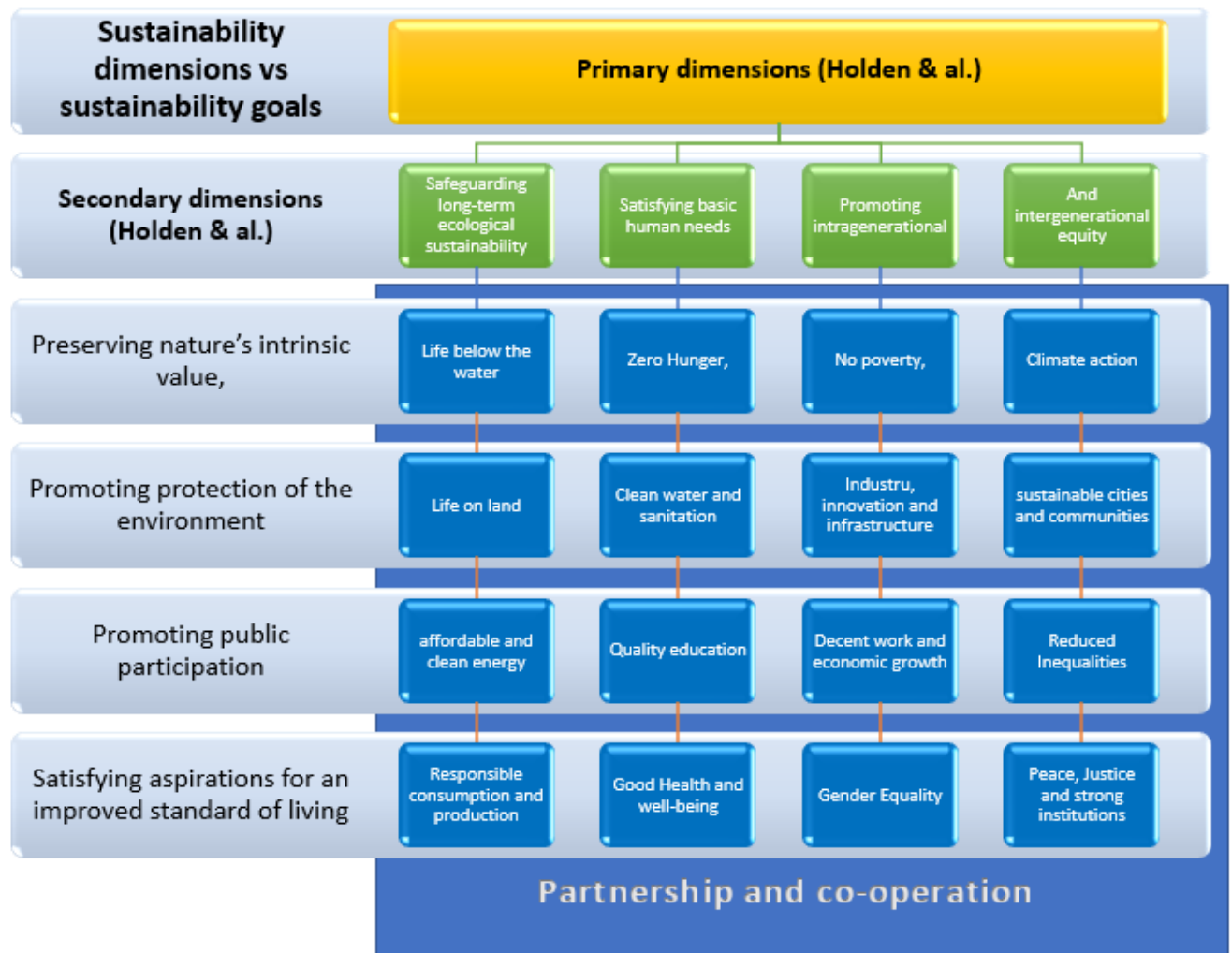


Figure 12: Brundtland Report vs 17 SDG:s

are even more emphasized than in Brundtland Report, and comparing to the Viktor's (1991) view of weak and strong sustainability (Figure 9) SDG:s could be considered to be closer the weak sustainability than the strong.

Three pillars or five levels?

How does then the original model of three pillars relate to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals? The elements (Environmental, Economic and Social) can be found also in SDG:s, but: Although in English the term "Social" can in many contexts be understood to cover both individuals and societies, the term is in many other languages divided into two terms. The term covering the topics approaching the societies is in common translated in English "Societal", and the topics approaching individuals are compiled under the umbrella term "Social". This linguistic operation opens a new view to the 17 goals of sustainability. Some of the goals are environmental or ecologic, some economic and there is no doubt that "No poverty", "Zero hunger" and "Good health and well-being" were social aspects. "Clean water and sanitation", "Affordable and clean energy", "Sustainable cities and communities",

“Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions” and “Reducing inequality between nations” are goals that have their impact on the whole community, and that also demand the work and commitment of the whole community, even the whole nation, to be realized, thus these should be classified as Societal goals. The fifth class, “Cultural goals” can be more controversial. However, education is an important part of nations cultural property, gender equality and equality in general between people are to the greatest extent a matter of culture. Reaching these 16 goals is possible only by co-operation, thus the partnership should be the base on which we found all our aims to build sustainable developing communities and nations (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Levels of Sustainable Development Goals

At least as important as the partnership is the holistic view. Organisation, enterprise, or country cannot state reaching the SDGs, if only activity it has, is e.g. climate policy or gender equality policy. That is not enough for the holistic approach.

How much is enough, is another issue.

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