

Book review: The Age of Sustainable Development

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Jeffrey D. Sachs

The Age of Sustainable Development

New York: Columbia University Press 2015, XVII + 543 pages,

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In the foreword to this book, Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary General of the United Nations makes two strong statements: "Sustainable development is the central challenge of our times" (p. xi), and: "We have the technologies and the know-how to succeed. With the dedicated efforts of each and every one of us, we can be the first generation to end extreme poverty and the last generation to face climate change as an existential threat" (p. xii). His optimism is conditioned, it seems, by only one assumption: "It is critical that we understand how sustainable development can be achieved in practice, on the ground, in all parts of the world" (p. xi).

Jeffrey D. Sachs, the author of the book, exactly wants to accomplish this. Over and over again, he tries to persuade the reader what sustainable development is or should be about, and how it can be put into practice, in various sectors and in the regions of the world. And he starts well by saying that sustainable development is both a way of looking at the world, with the focus on the interlinkages of economic, social, and environmental aspects (the three-pillars-model), and a way of describing shared aspirations for a decent life, combining economic development, social inclusion, and environmental integrity. That is, sustainable development is both an analytical theory and a normative framework; a way of understanding the world, and a method for solving global problems.

In Chapter 1, Sachs underpins this definition. His starting point is "our crowded planet". He does not quote Anne and Paul Ehrlich and their $I = P \times A \times T$ formula (1970) on environmental impacts (effects I), but closely follows their argumentation. There are now about 7.5 billion people on planet Earth (driver P), roughly 9 times the 800 million estimated to have lived in 1750. There is a gross world product, now at US\$ 12,000 per person, which means that the annual world output (driver A) is at least 100 times larger than at the beginning of the first Industrial Revolution. That 250-fold increase in total world output (or even a thousandfold increase in certain economic activities) results in multiple kinds of damage and destruction, especially so as the worldwide established technology (driver T) in very many cases is highly resource-intensive and heavily polluting, making nature the great loser in global development.

Sachs' conclusion on these global drivers is drastic: "The gigantic world economy is creating a gigantic environmental crisis, one that threatens the lives and wellbeing of billions of people and the survival of millions of other species on the planet, if not our own" (p. 2). The environmental threats, he continues, are rising on several fronts at the same time: climate change, shortage of fresh water, oceans chemistry, the habitat of other species, etc. To underpin the criticality of this point he refers to Johan Rockström et al. and their work on the ten major "planetary boundaries": during the twenty-first century, humanity will exceed the safe operating limits unless the world adopts a new strategy (p. 42). The answer Sachs gives to this prognosis however is not "de-growth", but "sustainable development".

The normative side of sustainable development should envision four basic objectives of a good society: economic prosperity; social inclusion and coherence; environmental sustainability; and good governance by major social actors, including governments and business (a four-pillars-model). This basic concept is Sachs' working definition of the normative objectives of sustainable development. Using the word 'sustainable' twice in this definition could have been avoided, if environmental integrity (or resilience) would have been chosen instead. However, what good governance means is possibly more debatable.

To demonstrate the real challenges of the concept, Sachs first looks at the world as it is – it is “an unequal world” (Chapter 2). Not only are there huge differences in income between the industrial countries and the least-developed countries, there is also great urban-rural inequality, and income inequality within countries. Measuring wellbeing still is not easy despite the many conceptual efforts made. But ranking countries according to their GDP per capita on the one side and HDI on the other, leads to quite some surprise: There are countries with HDI higher than GDP, and countries with GDP higher than HDI. New Zealand's GDP per capita rank is 21 in the world, while its HDI rank is 7; there is Qatar whose GDP rank is 3, while its HDI rank is only 31.

No doubt, these and other basic differences will make sustainable development as a global strategy (Ban Ki-moon's hope) more than difficult. That's why Sachs declares convergence a major strategic issue.

In Chapters 3 to 5, he examines the processes of convergence *versus* divergence in order to better understand why some countries developed while others stayed poor, and how to get on to a trajectory of convergence to end extreme poverty. All these and the other chapters are well documented and illustrated by global graphs and statistics. The problems of extreme poverty in Africa and elsewhere can be solved, he states, because the tools for solutions are more powerful than ever, in education, health care, agriculture, power, transport, finance, and other areas (p. 137). However, Sachs calls for “clinical economics” – in the sense of making a diagnosis that is accurate and effective for the conditions, history, geography, culture and economic structure of the country in question. He had developed this idea in his book “The End of Poverty”, and it has been brought into practical implementation in the “Millennium villages” project that began in ten countries in Africa and has since expanded to more than twenty.

Chapter 6 is an exploration of the concept of “planetary boundaries”. Sachs concedes that “we live in a world already bursting at the seams, with humanity pushing against planetary boundaries” (p. 199), and asks whether further economic growth can be reconciled with environmental integrity. He is an optimist though his answer is conditional: “In order to reconcile the growth that we would like to see with the ecological realities of planet Earth, we are going to need the world economy to develop in a fundamentally different way in the future” (p. 199). As practical examples, he addresses the case of energy and the case of food.

There are already powerful low-carbon energies available at sharply declining prices, and more of them will come, he states. Just as we need to find a new energy pathway based on energy efficiency and low-carbon energy supplies, we also need to find new farm systems, adapted to local ecological conditions and causing less ecological damage. The end result from these and other examples would be to “decouple” growth from resource use and environmental impacts. Seen globally, “resource decoupling” and “impact decoupling” are just not happening yet, as recent studies of the International Resource Panel (IRP) have shown. In addition, there are still the population dynamics which

Sachs addresses this way: “Reducing the fertility rates voluntarily, while respecting human rights and family desires is essential to sustainable development and the end of poverty” (p. 208). Even small changes of fertility rates would have big effects on outcomes. But the UN Population Division still uses four scenarios, and the medium-fertility variant reaches 10.8 billion people in the year 2100.

Chapters 7 to 11 are on complex topics, on social inclusion, education for all, health for all, food security, and resilient cities. They make interesting reading, are well documented by statistical details, and in a special way focus on the role the UN is playing. Declarations, Covenants, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are looked at, showing the richness of global thinking and action, as well as the successes and the deficiencies in various fields.

Since 2008, according to UN official data, more than 50 percent of the human population lives in cities, and urbanization is growing fast. What makes a city sustainable, green, and resilient has not only become an important research issue but is also of great importance to all those who leave the countryside for cities. Smart infrastructure is a major issue, and so are water supply and waste management. Sachs presents pictures of the smog in Beijing and New York City, the damage of the earth-quake in Port au Prince, and the blackout in downtown Manhattan. All this shows how important urban resilience has become as a political issue.

In the following chapters Sachs becomes an environmentalist. In Chapter 12 he refers to the basic science and the consequences of human-induced climate change, to the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions and the adaptation to climate change, and to the politics of “decarbonisation”.

Saving biodiversity and protecting ecosystem services are in focus in Chapter 13. Biodiversity in general is under stress, and so are forests and oceans in particular. Sachs uses the threatening word “sixth great extinction” to indicate what may be at stake. No wonder then that he turns to the international dynamics that have been started – from the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to the various implementation protocols to that treaty.

All this makes a good introduction to the final part of the book, Chapter 14 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), internationally adopted in 2015. “The world is far off course for achieving sustainable development” (p. 481) – that’s the disturbing kick-off for Sachs, the analyst. Sachs, the political economist however presents a stimulating impulse: “The call for SDGs is a historic decision, a powerful way to move to a new global agenda. The SDGs will be universally applicable: The United States, just like Mali, needs to learn to live sustainably” (p. 484/5).

Can we elaborate SDGs and carry them out in time? This is the last question. Sachs quotes three great thinkers who have expressed their doubts: Jane Jacobs, the urbanist who called her last book “Dark Age Ahead”; the astronomer Lord Martin Rees and his book “Our Final Century”; the inventor of the Gaia theory, James Lovelock and his recent book “The Revenge of Gaia”.

But Jeffrey Sachs is a US-American, and he thus concludes in a different way: “Sustainable development is the greatest, most complicated challenge humanity has ever faced” (p. 506); and continues: “We must not give up hope. I believe that despite the cynicism, the darkness, the confusion, and the miserable politics on many of these issues, we can make a breakthrough. The most important message I would (like to) send is that ideas count” (p. 507).

Conclusion: Jeffrey Sachs' book on "The Age of Sustainable Development" is a comprehensive, incisive, well illustrated and highly valuable book – a true must-read. It is full of great ideas and practical suggestions. However, with 560 pages it is much too voluminous to become the most read book on sustainable development. A condensed edition should therefore be produced in order to reach more people – if not each and every one, as the UN Secretary General so vividly requested.

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