

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN A POST-COVID WORLD

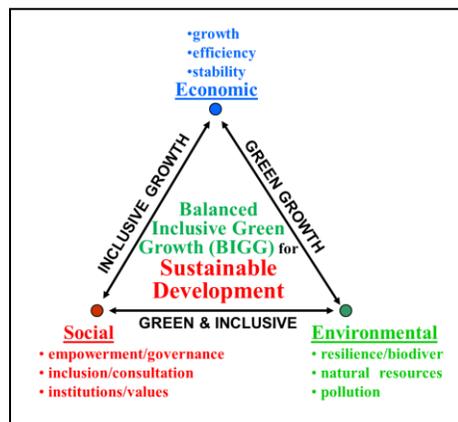
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The global community needs to urgently and effectively address two major challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – sustainable development (SD) and climate change (CC). We already face formidable development problems like poverty, inequality, hunger, sickness, and water and energy scarcities. Emerging issues like COVID-19 continue to pose further risks. Climate change is the ultimate risk multiplier, worsening all other crises. Climate justice demands that we help the poor and vulnerable -- they are least responsible for the problem, but face the worst impacts, and have no resources to cope.

The most effective approach is to integrate CC adaptation and mitigation policies into national SD strategy. It also gains the support of decision makers who are otherwise pre-occupied with immediate economic problems like growth, unemployment, and inflation. One practical way forward is to use the “Sustainomics” transdisciplinary, integrated framework presented by Munasinghe at the 1992 UN Rio Earth Summit, and widely applied over the past three decades. It draws on the following basic principles.

First, sustainomics urges us to “make development more sustainable” (MDMS) -- empowering



people to act immediately, without waiting for instructions from leaders. It is like ‘climbing a mountain’, one step at a time. Although SD may be an unseen peak covered with clouds, one can still keep walking uphill and eventually reach the top. This is quite practical because many unsustainable activities are easy to recognize and eliminate, like conserving energy and water, or planting trees. Starting with individuals, the movement can expand to group action in communities, companies, cities, countries and globally.

**Figure 1. Harmonise and integrate sustainable development triangle (economic, social and environmental dimensions) for sustainability.**

Source: Adapted from Munasinghe (1992)

Second, the SD triangle (including social, economic and environmental dimensions and their interactions) must be harmonized for sustainability, with balanced and integrated analysis (Figure 1). The triangle provides useful analytical insights into both longer term problems like climate CC and short term issues like COVID-19. For example, economic growth drives emissions that cause CC, while CC impacts undermine socio-economic systems and unfairly penalize the poor. Furthermore, CC exacerbates ecological damage, while environmental harm (like deforestation) worsens CC. Another example is that pandemics arise from zoonoses (pathogens) jumping from animals to humans due to unsustainable economic-environmental interactions, including encroachment of wildlife habitats, and risky livestock practices. Such diseases then disrupt socio-economic systems. Yet, social solidarity and cooperation (eg., masking, social distancing, and basic hygiene) are essential to combat Covid-19.

Third, we need to transcend conventional boundaries relating to values, discipline, space, time, and stakeholder viewpoints. It is essential to replace unsustainable values like greed, selfishness and violence with sound ethical principles. Trans-disciplinary analysis (cutting across conventional disciplines) is needed to find innovative solutions to complex problems like SD and CC. Spatial analysis must range from the local to the global. Time horizons needs to extend from days to centuries. Finally, transcending stakeholder boundaries for cooperation is vital, especially having civil society and business work supportively with government.

Fourth, implementation is essential. Sustainomics provides many practical tools that have been already applied innovatively around the world. However, harmonizing the SD triangle is not easy in practice. It requires each country to find a balanced inclusive green growth (BIGG) path, consistent with its own stage of development -- including the 17 universal sustainable development goals (SDG) prioritized according to country needs.

Figure 2 shows the stylized relationship between environmental harm (measured by GHG emissions per capita), and economic prosperity (measured by GNP per capita).

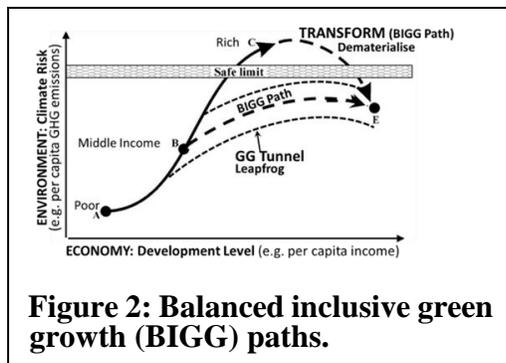


Figure 2 shows the stylized relationship between environmental harm (measured by GHG emissions per capita), and economic prosperity (measured by GNP per capita). Poor nations at point A have low income and low emissions. Rich nations at point C are already unsustainable and exceeding safe ecological limits. Wealthy countries can first re-balance economy and environment to reach sustainable point E, by reducing natural resource use while maintaining their good quality of life. This step is called **green growth**. They could use new resource efficient technologies, lifestyle changes, etc., that dematerialize modern economies. Meanwhile, emerging nations (like Turkey and Sri Lanka) at intermediate point B should harmonize economy and environment, by learning



from the past and innovating. They can find the green growth (GG) tunnel to also reach point E, keeping within safe limits and avoiding the unsustainable path of rich countries.

A second step is also essential to create BIGG that satisfies social goals, by adding pro-poor, inclusive and inequality-reducing policies to GG. This process fully harmonizes the SD triangle: economy, environment and society. Furthermore, the same BIGG path is generally available for other resources like energy, food and water – helping humanity move forward towards sustainability, within the holistic framework of the UN 2030 Agenda and 17 SDG.

Another aspect of the BIGG process that peace-loving countries like Sri Lanka and Turkey should support is the ongoing transition to a more sustainable, peaceful, harmonious, equitable, multilateral world order. Countries are shifting away from the old unipolar system that relied on hegemonic military power, punitive sanctions, and one global currency (USD), towards a rules-based world order with multiple power centres, that will rely on soft economic power, multiple global currencies, mutually beneficial trading relationships, and cultural harmony. This trend towards a more sustainable and conflict-free planet will be widely welcomed, given unpalatable facts like global expenditures on armaments rising to almost 2 trillion dollars versus just 161 billion dollars of official development aid for poverty; and billionaires increasing their wealth 11.4% as billions starved -- while Covid ravaged the world in 2020.

Integrated solutions are urgently needed to address complex, multiple issues including unsustainable growth, climate change and pandemics. These problems can be solved together, applying Sustainomics and BIGG to build a safer future. Future generations in Sri Lanka and Turkey, using wisdom and advanced technologies, can lead the way forward.

*We are all inter-connected on one planet. We must unite to save the earth and ourselves.*

### **References**

Munasinghe, M. (2019), [\*Sustainability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Applying Sustainomics to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals\*](#), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.