

**6th SWS INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE
ON SOCIAL SCIENCES 2019**

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

VOLUME 6

ISSUE 1



**POLITICAL SCIENCES, LAW,
ECONOMICS AND FINANCE**

26 August – 1 September, 2019

Albena, Bulgaria

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Published by STEF92 Technology Ltd., 51 “Alexander Malinov” Blvd., 1712 Sofia, Bulgaria

Total print: 5000

ISBN 978-619-7408-91-1

ISSN 2682-9959

DOI: 10.5593/SWS.ISCSS.2019.1

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND EQUAL ACCESS TO ENERGY SOURCES. A HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The concern for the environment has become increasingly relevant since the second half of the last century. The principle of sustainable development started to be considered significant in the environmental legislation around the same time. The evolution of the principle of sustainable development can be followed through the pronouncements of the international organizations, first and foremost the United Nations. From the Brundtland Report and the Rio Declaration, to the Paris Agreement and the UN Agenda 2030, in more than thirty years we have come a long way. Now the concern for a truly sustainable development is considered as a precondition for any environmental policy and regulatory action. The most relevant issue, in order to ensure a sustainable development for the next decades, is energetic sustainability. Energy is an essential part of innovation, progress and human life. A limited access to energy sources represents more than just a loss of economic potential; it goes against the fundamental rights of the human person: equality, health and wellbeing. The UN Agenda 2030 clearly expresses this awareness and provides a basis for lawmaking processes aimed at ensuring to all a safe and equal access to energy sources.

Keywords: Sustainable development, energy poverty, human rights, environment, United Nations

INTRODUCTION

The modification of environmental conditions, from a socioeconomic perspective, was carried out to improve the quality of human existence. The unlimited use of environmental goods and services has led to profound changes within the environment, which ultimately affect the quality of human life. The recognition of these changes has promoted the creation of legal measures aimed at the protection and the rational use of the environment. During the last decades of the twentieth century, however, the idea of limiting such modifications in some cases has become widely accepted. That is because the damages caused to the environment are often more severe than what the environment can withstand without generating risks to human beings. However, environmental policies so far have not been able to discourage the growing demand for “progress”, which has increased significantly in recent years. The necessity of achieving a sustainable development which guarantees respect for the environment and, at the same time, overall wellness, based on

safe and equal access to energy sources, is now commonly accepted. International organizations, first and foremost the United Nations, have approved formal declarations and agreements dealing with sustainable development. A human rights-based approach of the lawmaking process aimed to achieve sustainable development is becoming normative.

1. THE NOTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The concept of limiting the development in the perspective of preserving the natural ecosystems, a necessary condition for human life, started growing stronger in the 1970s, when scientists from around the world met in Stockholm for the first conference on the environment [1]. They agreed that the type of development of their age was irreversibly damaging the environment. It was logical and consequential then to identity a “limit” to this trend. This limit was though at odds with the idea of unbridled economic growth, a prerequisite for the Western model of development. From a radical point of view, they applied the logic that if the exploitation of natural resources is what sustains economic growth, then economic development and the protection of the environment were incompatible. Setting a limit, according to this conception, would have implied a deceleration in economic growth and a faster regeneration of nature. The basic idea that underlies this rigorous conception of limitation is that economic development is directly proportional to environmental degradation. The consequence of uncontrolled economic development thus was a level of natural degradation expected to unbalance the environmental equilibrium. This awareness determined the need to provide for a quantitative limit to development. Meanwhile, the collective consciousness that the environment does not have an infinite capacity to regenerate its resources in a limited amount of time and that, therefore, there is a level of environmental balance that cannot be overcome began to spread. If the human activities that alter the ecological balance beyond a certain limit were to be further tolerated, the time for the self-regeneration of the environment could have become extremely long. That would have affected not only the quality of life of the next generations, but also the future living conditions of the whole planet [2].

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE FIRST STEPS

The tendency to consider the deterioration of the environment as an inevitable consequence of development has prevailed for much of the twentieth century, but in most recent years, this perspective has radically changed. The issue of sustainable development became a popular one only in the 1980s. In October 1984, the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) met for the first time. The Commission started with the assumption that humanity could build a better, more prosperous and more secure future. With this optimistic approach, in 1987 the WCED published the report “Our Common Future”, also called the Brundtland Report. The Commission stated that humanity has the capacity to achieve “sustainable development”. The WCED defined sustainable development as what guarantees the needs of the present without compromising the possibilities of future generations to satisfy their own needs. The Commission affirmed the need to establish a balance between socio-economic development and environmental protection. From that moment on, the concept of sustainable development began to spread more widely all over the world [3]. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, arising from the United Nations Conference, held in Rio de Janeiro

from June 3 to 14 1992, adopted this philosophy, definitively overcoming the prejudice of an absolute logical incompatibility between the idea of well-being and the concept of limitation to environmental exploitation [4].

The notion of sustainable development has an economic nature, but its broad concept is generally considered a valid approach for policymaking. It needs to take into account the long-term perspectives and the interaction between different development trajectories and political actions. In the relation between the economy and the environment, indeed, the specific task of politics is to determine a unitary equilibrium, without sector-specific partitions. The sustainability of development is an idea related to the balance between environmental and economic concerns. To be considered sustainable, development must not cause damages that go beyond a certain threshold. From this principle follows that the ones who are responsible for harmful activities must take into account the costs of protection and restoration. Those who have the political responsibility to promote development must make an accurate assessment of the environmental costs coming with it. Consequently, as progress should not stop, it becomes necessary to estimate the costs of preventing or repairing the damage produced. These are costs that should be imputed to those who exploit natural resources beyond the limit of collective interest. Hence, the necessity of implementing the “Polluter-Pays Principle” [5], that was laid down in the 1992 Rio Declaration. The cost evaluation should be part of the financial planning of the commercial activity. To this day, though, most natural resources are used without considering environmental costs. Although the environmental accounting considers a wide range of costs, including energy and material use, waste disposal, insurance policies, fines and penalties [6], the amount of environmental damages is generally not considered as a specific element of a company's budget, since the price for the measures for the recovery of the natural resources cannot be quantified in advance.

3. A TURNING POINT IN THE EVOLUTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A crucial year for the development of the notion of sustainable development was 2015. In September 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a set of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In December 2015 parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) reached a landmark agreement to combat climate change and to accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable low carbon future: the Paris Agreement [7]. Both documents originated by the necessity of finding shared solutions to collective problems: poverty, inequality, exclusion of large parts of the planet population and the need to develop sustainable societies all over the world. In particular, the 2030 Agenda represents now the milestone for the lawyers who focus their research in the field of sustainable development. This document indeed provides the foundations for a model of sustainable development totally centred on the human person: human rights are tied to the Goals contained in the 2030 Agenda in a mutually reinforcing way. It is affirmed indeed that these Goals “seek to realize the human rights of all”, and the vast majority of them reflect provisions of international human rights instruments. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda makes explicit reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to the international human rights treaties throughout its text. The seventeen

SDGs directly or indirectly are characterized by the consistency with human rights standards. The relation between these Goals, each of them rooted in the human rights, and their corresponding targets, attests a thick interconnection, as the main part of the targets are linked to core international human rights and labour standards. This means that the 2030 Agenda can be seen as an operational plan for realizing human rights.

3. ENERGY POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Energy is of paramount importance to human and economic development and plays an important role in the challenge of making development sustainable [8]. Two SDGs of the 2030 Agenda deal with energetic issues: Goal 7, that aims to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy sources and, indirectly, Goal 13, designed to promote urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. They can be considered “twin” goals: on one side it is affirmed the need to ensure affordable and clean energy access to all human beings, on the other side it is expressed the urgency to address climate change through the reduction of fossil fuel use for energy.

The issue of energy poverty is closely linked to human rights and sustainable development. Energy poverty is the lack of access to energy services. It regards large portions of the populations of developing countries, mainly in the rural areas of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh 570 million people do not have access to electricity. In Sub-Saharan Africa the number of people without access to electricity has actually risen in the last two decades, despite a light increment of the rate of electrification [9]. Good progress has been made since 2000 in East Asia and Latin America: the positive economic performance has allowed to extend the electricity networks in these areas. But energy poverty is still diffused also in developed countries, where the well-being of many people is hindered by very low consumption of energy. The phenomenon of energy poverty, sometimes referred to as “energy precariousness”, is widespread in many countries of Europe [10], and the EU set up in 2016 an “Energy Poverty Observatory” to spread knowledge about the extent of energy poverty in Europe, and spur innovative policies and practices to combat it. Measuring the incidence of energy poverty is particularly difficult due to the specific nature of the problem: it is private, as it is confined to the domestic environment; it is dynamic, as it varies in the time and in the space; and it is culturally sensitive, as the expectations of energy service are different in relation to the social groups [11].

CONCLUSION

As the UN 2030 Agenda clearly highlights, sustainable development and human rights are closely related. One of the pivotal SDGs of the Agenda is about energy, that is considered as an unavoidable element of human life and an essential basis of progress and innovation. The access to energy sources is a fundamental human right, related to key principles like human dignity and equality. Energy ensures health and well-being to everyone. A limited access to the energy sources thus represents more than just a loss of economic potential: it entails a problem related to the fundamental rights of the human person. Lawmaking processes need to be aimed at ensuring to all a safe and equal access to energy sources. The ways through which this objective can be achieved are different: on a formal plane, legal professionals have to be aware of the necessity of a human rights

based approach to sustainable development and to energetic issues. This process has already started [12], but needs to be strengthened. In practical terms, specific actions and interventions must be carried out in areas of legislation that involve an ethical decision-making with respect to energy issues. In this perspective, a new inter-disciplinary approach can be of particular value. Various branches of knowledge need to be involved: law, politics, geography, anthropology, and sociology must intersect [13]. This particular attitude in legal scholarship implies significant efforts, but seems, at the present time, a necessary innovation.

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