HS 200 / 250 – Environmental Studies

Sociology Module 1 – Sustainable Development

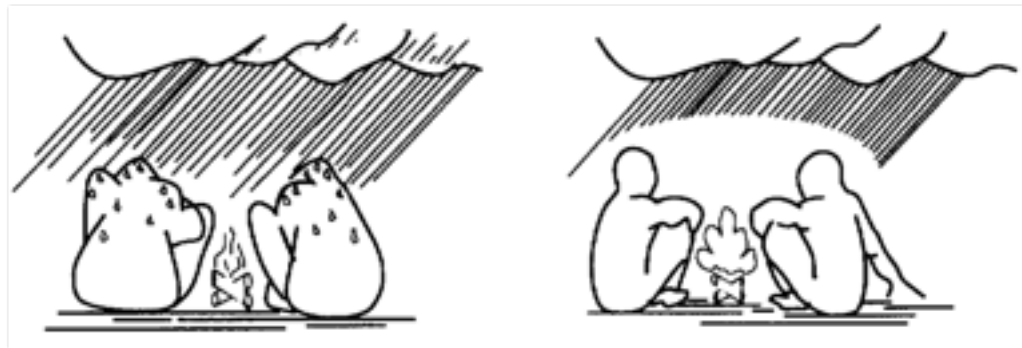Mahendra Shahare, HSS, IIT Bombay

Outline

- The context for social sciences perspectives

- The environment and notions of development

- Concept of sustainable development

What is environmental studies?

- Environmental studies (ES) as a sub-discipline of natural science?

- But how do we take into account the actions of human societies and assess the environmental consequences

- Actions of humans depend on social organisation. So cultural attitudes, economic organisation, and the prevalent political processes become important factors.

- ES integrates understandings from both the sciences and social sciences

- This course essentially puts together a multidisciplinary perspective from the humanities and social sciences disciplines to understand and assess human interactions with the environment

Why Care?

- Humans have achieved tremendous success vis-à-vis securing life from the whims of the nature

- Technology as a cultural response to human problems

- Why then we need to care about the environment? Why the environment is an issue at all? Why social sciences are relevant?

Image Source: Michael A. Rosenman & John S. Gero. , 98

Why a social science perspective matters?

- Our perceptions of nature, the way we look at it, are shaped by society and culture (meanings and beliefs) e.g. River Ganga

- Our responses to environmental problems depends upon social structures and relationship (power and institutions) e.g. New Bombay Airport, Nicobar port

- Human societies are ultimately dependent upon natural life-support systems (the global eco-system or bio-sphere)

- Our social organization is shaped by our material interventions into nature (labour and technology) and has environmental implications

Thinking sociologically

Image Source: Wikipedia

Thinking sociologically

- Left: Yamuna Reclaims Floodplain in Delhi – Red Fort (July 2023)
- Right: Mughal Era Painting (c1815 AD) of Yamuna River Front

Image Source: https://twitter.com/ssharadmohhan/

Thinking sociologically

The hill town of Joshimath in Uttarakhand – land sinking or subsidence in Jan 2023

Image Source: Down to Earth and BBC

Thinking sociologically

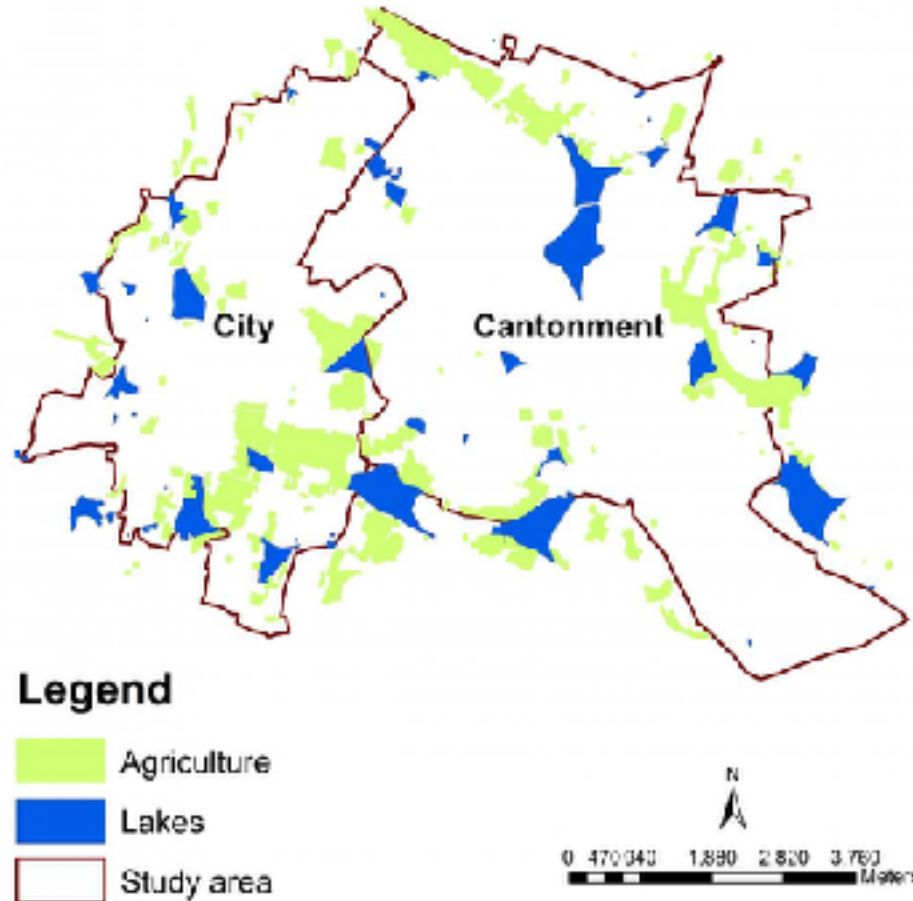Figure 1. Presence and distribution of lakes in the city of Bangalore, circa 1885

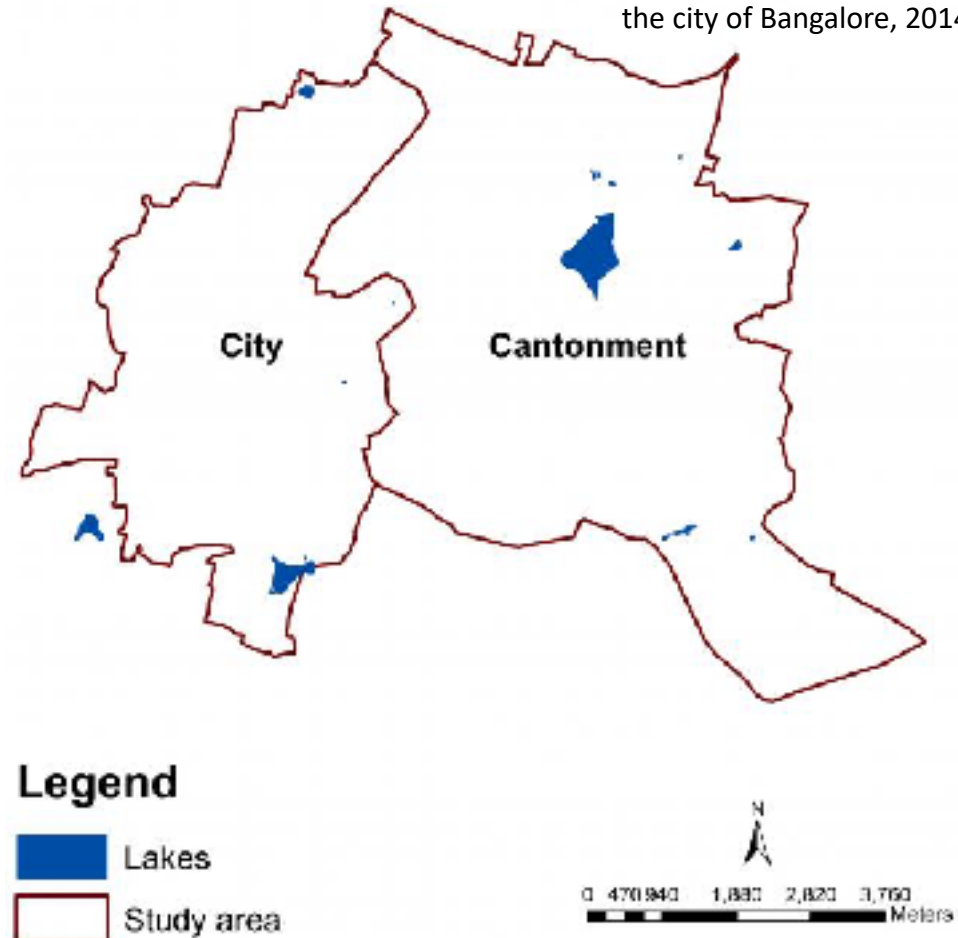Figure 2. Presence and distribution of lakes in the city of Bangalore, 2014

City

Cantonment

Legend

Agriculture

Lakes

Study area

N

0 470 940   1,880   2,820 3,760
                              Meters

City

Cantonment

Legend

Lakes

Study area

N

0 470 940   1,880   2,820 3,760
                              Meters

What is nature?

- How do we think of nature? How can we think of human-nature relationships?

- Biophysical or cultural?

- Utilitarian (instrumental) vs non-utilitarian (intrinsic value)

Powai Lake
Image Source: Wikipedia

Thinking sociologically

- Thinking sociologically about nature and the environment:
  - How have understandings of 'nature' and 'the environment' changed over time
  - What social transformations have led to these shifts in perception?
- Nature as sacred
- Nature as wild and disordered, should be controlled and dominated
- Humans as part of nature; we have to live with nature

Risk, Responsibility, and Reflexivity

- Recent works in sociology - Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck

- Human beings have to become more reflexive before every single decision

- Business as usual is no longer possible

- Every single action accumulates

- Not enough to collect information and analyse; but think of broader implications of knowledge that we have

Organized Irresponsibility

Pen-ny-wise Pound Foolish
Glass & Steel 2022

Do we belong to times that may be regarded,
as the old proverb goes,
penny wise, pound foolish?

The ease with which we discard a ball pen,
suggests that we fail to see
the connection between this
and climate change.

You may drop a used ball pen
through the slot at the top,
to fill up the belly of the pen.
But everytime you look at this pen,
filled with discraded pens,
ask, are we being pound foolish?

Art@IITB

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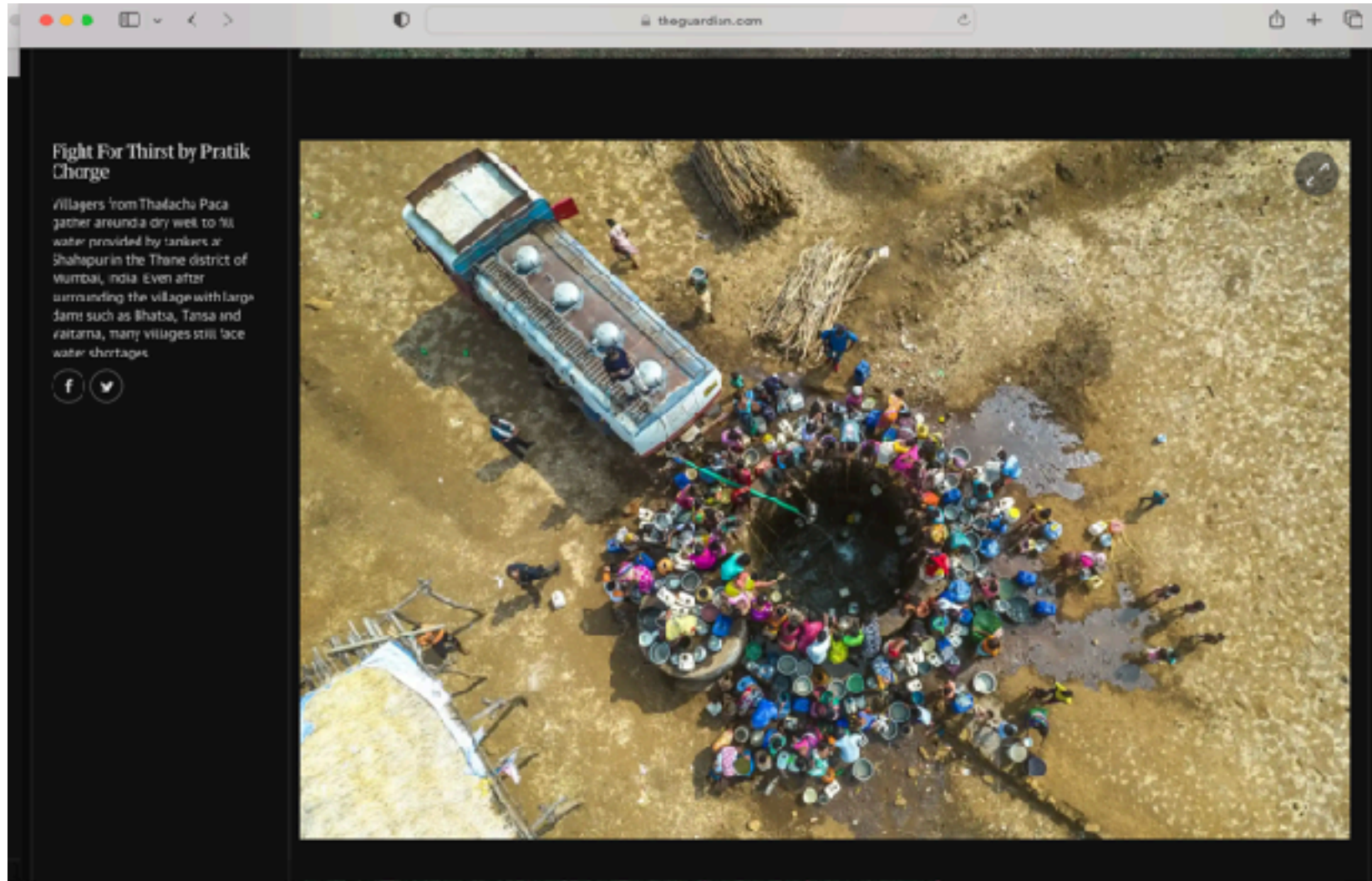
What is Development?

Image Source: https://www.theguardian.com/

What is Development?

- The United Nations adopted eight 'Millennium Development Goals' in September 2000 :
  - Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
  - Achieve universal primary education;
  - Promote gender equality and empower women;
  - Reduce child mortality;
  - Improve maternal health;
  - Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
  - Ensure environmental sustainability;
  - Develop a global partnership for development.

The Contested Nature of Development

- The way development is measured is also not without problems

- Development is often measured in Gross National Product per capita (GNP p.c.) or Gross Domestic Product per capita

- Later in 1980s the Human Development Index (HDI) was devised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

The Environment and Development

- In 1970s human-environment relationship debate entered the political sphere

- The first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) took place in Stockholm in June 1972

- The discussion was dominated by pollution, deforestation and whaling

- But the problem of environment and pollution needs to be viewed from the angle of poverty too

Earthrise
Image Source: NASA

The Environment and Development

- "Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters? For instance, unless we are in a position to provide employment and purchasing power for the daily necessities of the tribal people and those who live in or around our jungles, we cannot prevent them from combing the forest for food and livelihood...How can we speak to those who live in villages and in slums about keeping the oceans, the rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the source? " – Indira Gandhi, UNCHE, 1972.

The Environment and Development

- The very concept of the environment is also contested

- Battles between *haves* and *have nots*

- There are multiple actors involved in development – Individual, household, community, government, NGOs, private companies, multilateral organisations

- What counts as an environmental problem?

Approaches to Development

	APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT
1950s	Modernization theories: all countries should follow the European model
1960s	Modernization theories: Dependency theories: Southern countries poor because of exploitation by Northern countries
1970s	Basic needs approaches: focus of government and aid policies Neo-Malthusian theories: need to control economic growth, resource use and population growth Women and development:
1980s	Neoliberalism: focus on the market. Sustainable development: Gender and development:
1990s	Neoliberalism: Sustainable development: Culture and development:
2000s	Neoliberalism: increased engagement with concepts of globalization Sustainable development: Rights-based development:

Source: Katie Willis; Theories and Practices of Development

References/ Additional Readings

- Katie Willis. Theories and Practices of Development. Second Edition. Routledge, 2011.

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Sustainable Development

- Definition - Brundtland Report: *Our Common Future* (1987)

  "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"
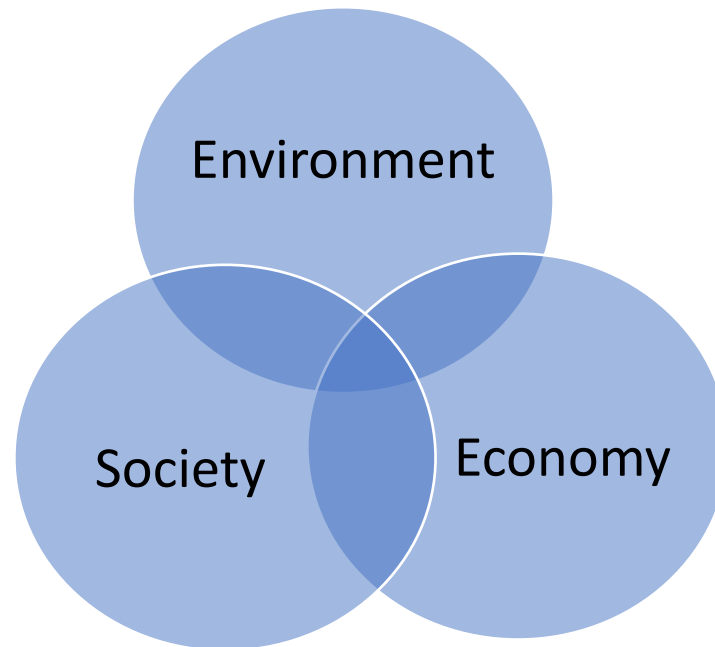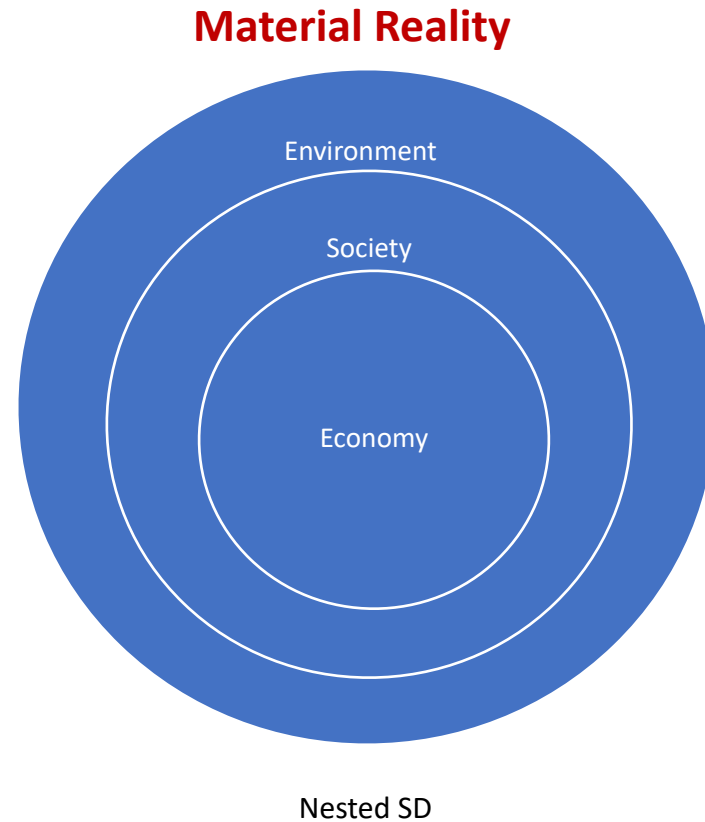
Source: Wikipedia

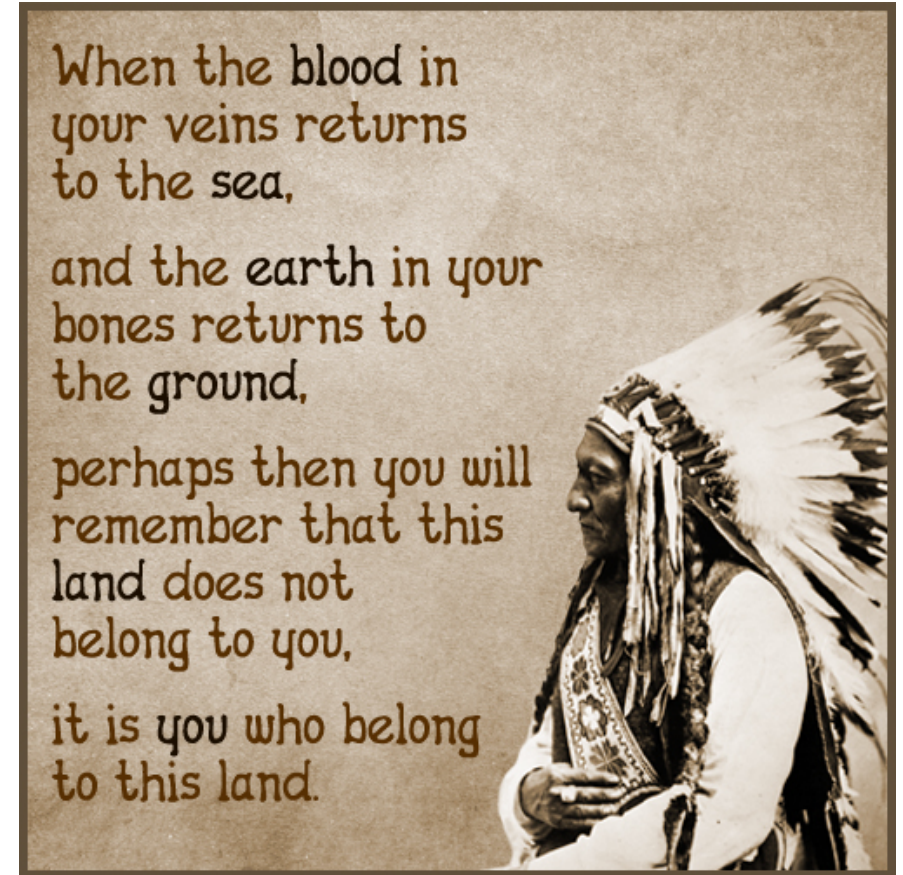# From unsustainable to sustainable development

Political Reality

Common three-ring sector view of SD

From unsustainable to sustainable development

Material Reality

Environment

Society

Economy

Nested SD

Source: Giddings, Hopwood, and O'Brien, 2002

Sustainable Development

- Francis Bacon - "The world is made for man, not man for the world"

- But SD requires making choices of different kinds, having the courage to do so

When the blood in your veins returns to the sea,

and the earth in your bones returns to the ground,

perhaps then you will remember that this land does not belong to you,

it is you who belong to this land.

Source: Native American, Wikipedia

Sustainable Development

- Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): 2000-2015

- Agenda 2030 or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 17 interconnected goals with 169 targets

- SDGs: Aiming at ending poverty, promoting prosperity and people's well-being while protecting the environment for next 15 years (2016-2030)

Source: Wikipedia

Sustainable Development

- SD is an attempt to combine growing concerns about a range of environmental issues with socio-economic issues

- SD is an unashamedly anthropocentric concept

- Environmental problems not local and threaten people's health, livelihoods and lives

- SD raises questions about the post-war claim that prosperity and human well-being can be achieved through increased global trade and industry

- Social justice and SD – A means to eradicate poverty, meet human needs and ensure that all get a fair share of resources

Sustainable Development

- Sustainability is 'laden with so many definitions that it risks plunging into meaninglessness, at best, and becoming a catchphrase for demagogy, at worst. [It] is used to justify and legitimate a myriad of policies and practices ranging from communal agrarian utopianism to large-scale capital-intensive market development'

- If the economy grows, eventually all will benefit i.e. the trickle-down theory

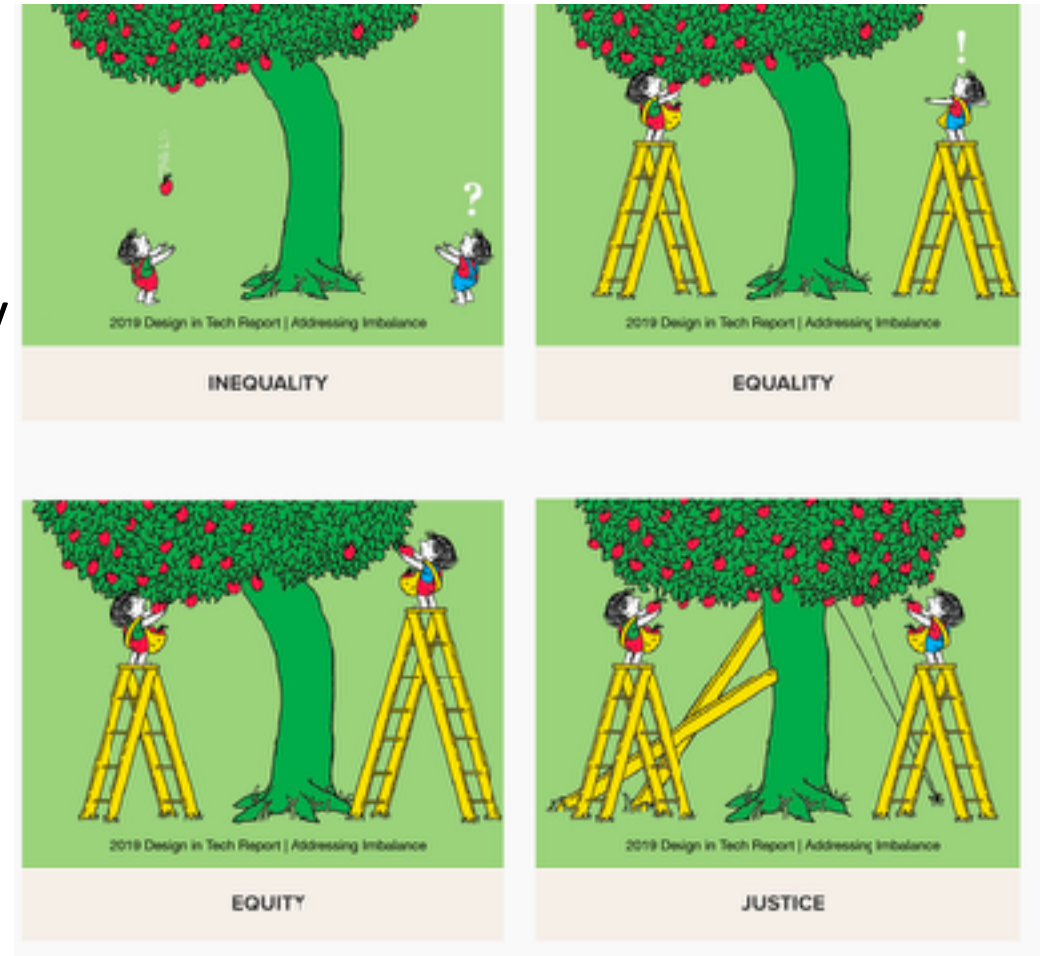- Development is open to confusion, with some seeing it as an end in itself
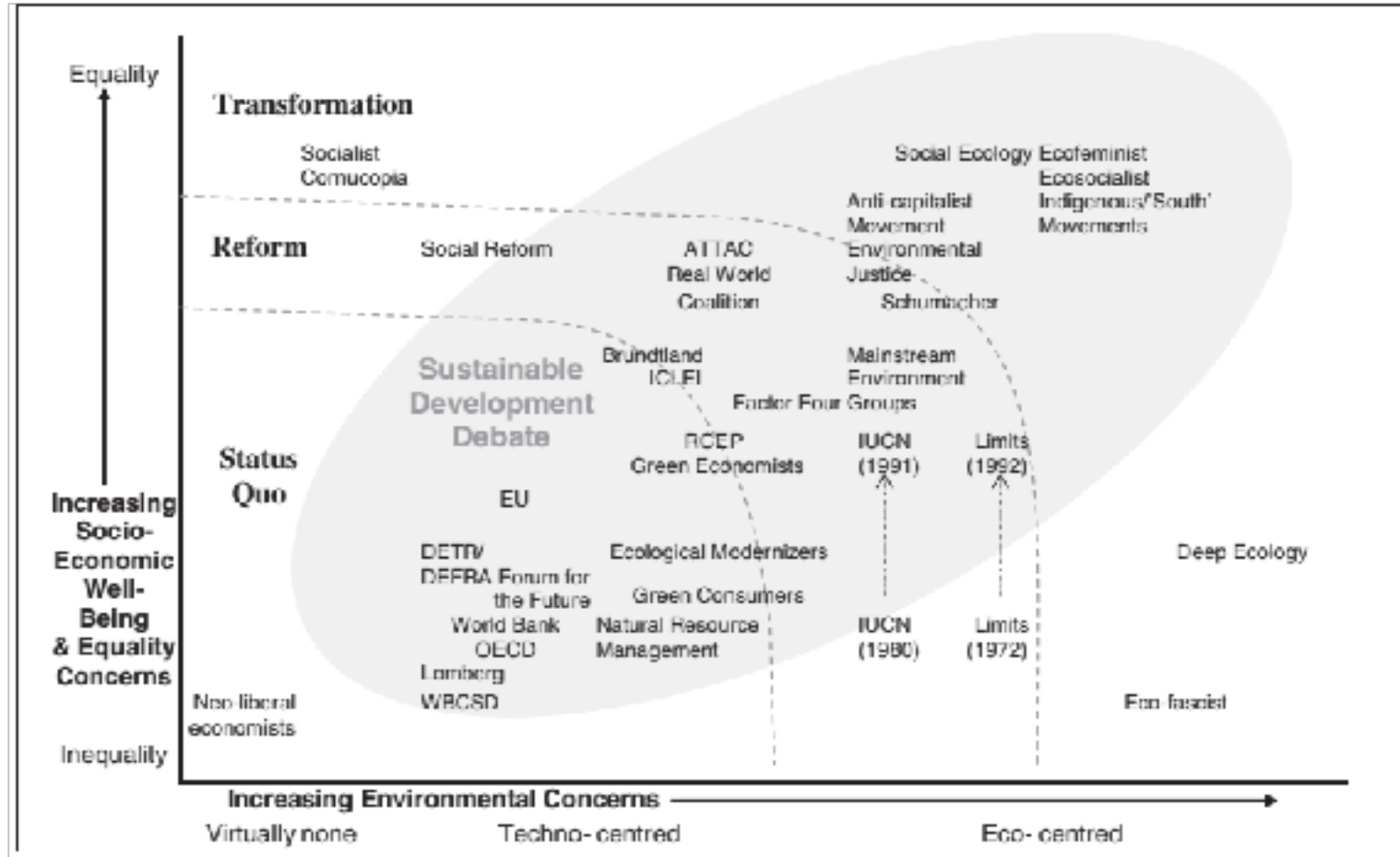
Views of Sustainability

- Weak sustainability sees natural and manufactured capital as interchangeable with technology able to fill human produced gaps in the natural world viz. air purifiers

- Strong sustainability argues that humanmade capital cannot replace a multitude of processes vital to human existence viz. the ozone layer

- Deep Greens would go further in arguing that non-human species, natural systems and biodiversity have rights and values in themselves

Five Principles of SD

- Haughton's (1999) five principles of equity for SD:
  - **futurity** – inter-generational equity
  - **social justice** – intra-generational equity
  - **trans-frontier responsibility** – geographical equity
  - **procedural equity** – people treated openly and fairly
  - **interspecies equity** – importance of biodiversity

Source: https://www.gwu.edu

Mapping Different Approaches

Figure 1. Mapping of views on sustainable development

Source: Bill Hopwood*, Mary Mellor and Geoff O'Brien (2005)

Mapping Different Approaches

- Status quo: Adjustments can be made without any fundamental changes to society; economic growth is seen as part of the solution

- Reform: The root of the problem not in the nature of present society, but in imbalances and a lack of knowledge and information; government policies and new technologies as a solution

- Transformation: Mounting problems in the environment and/or society as rooted in fundamental features of society today and how humans interrelate and relate with the environment; inclusive social and political action as solution

Conclusion

- All proponents of sustainable development agree that society needs to change
- There is no single unified philosophy of sustainable development
- But Sustainable development has become the central framework for thinking about links between the environment and society
- Sustainable development will require a shift in how humans see the world

References

- Bill Hopwood, Mary Mellor and Geoff O'Brien (2005). *Sustainable Development:* Mapping Different Approaches. Sustainable Development 13, 38–52.