

Competitive Exams: Sustainable Development

In recent years an important issue has arisen. The issue is whether the level of development, even in a developing country where it is fairly low, is sustainable. In developed countries, the major cause of worry about sustainability of development is supposed to be a wasteful consumption style and in many developing countries, the cause of such worry is said to be large and increasing population.

In this context, there are two facts, which are brought to our notice. One, present production technology makes use of non-renewable (exhaustible) natural resources such as fossil fuels (coal, gas and petroleum) or even of renewable natural resources (such as forests, animals and water) to such an extent that their regeneration becomes difficult. Two, present production technology (along with disposal practices of waste) pollutes atmosphere and water bodies with garbage, litter, smoke and other poisonous gases. The more goods you produce, more non-renewable natural resources get exhausted and our environment become further polluted. Nature has some assimilative capacity. But, if pollution level is too high, the nature may not be able to assimilate it. Clean air and clean water may not be available to us. There may not be enough trees around us to clean our atmosphere and we may have to suffer from various health problems. If non-renewable natural resources deplete fast, future generations may not have enough stock for its use. It means that if we continue growing our economies the way we do, there may come a point when it may become impossible to continue with the level of development reached. Sustainable development may, therefore, require the preservation of stocks of resources, including environmental resources and exhaustible natural resources.

A study in 1972 had tried to show that limits to growth on the planet will be reached sometime in next hundred years if present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production and resource depletion were to continue unchanged. There is little reliance, in this view, on future development of technology, which may enhance productivity through efficiency. Some do point out that there would then be no mining and no industry. However, it is always prudent to be cautious. Before constraints loom large, it is not a bad idea to apply restraint. The message is that the pattern of growth may have to be changed in certain economies and in others, the level reached may have to be maintained rather than substantially enhanced. Many analysts do not segregate environment; they suggest that it does not respect national boundaries.

Irrespective of where green house gases are produced, global warming will take place. If ozone layer withers, whole humanity will suffer from its consequences. Concerned with environmental degradation, a world commission was set up in the recent past, which produced a report in 1987 under the title 'Our Common Future' This report defines sustainable development as that level

which takes care of the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of the future generations. We normally discussed development as process not as level. The definition of sustainable development can, therefore, be modified as a path of development in which options of future generations are not compromised by the path taken by the present generation.

It is indeed difficult to determine the path that is sustainable or to find out whether the path is unique. It simply makes us cautious about our choice over consumption style and efforts in inventing technology and perhaps restraining growth in population.

Quality of Life

One shred of quality of life is already indicated in earlier section on sustainable development. If quality of air, quality of water and quality of sanitation are not good, the quality of life also will not be good. If our surroundings are littered, if the air is polluted or if we do not get safe drinking water, then we will not have a good life, no matter how much of many desirable goods we are able to buy from market. One can add availability of food, clothing, shelter, education facilities, health care, legal aid and security to the list of clean water, clean air and clean surrounding in order to define the quality of life.

However, there is another shred of thinking which is not altogether unrelated to it. Those who suggest the other line, point out that the items listed above are determinants of well-being. We can think about quality of life in terms of its constituents too. The items listed above lead to better health, welfare, freedom of choice, and basic liberties, which are all indices of well-being. One should also be interested in distribution of well-being along gender, caste, class or regional lines. Many analysts hold that a society with somewhat overall lower literacy rate but equality between male and female literacy rates is better than another that has somewhat higher overall literacy rate but has gross inequality between male and female literacy rates.

Some people also think that certain rights, which people enjoy in certain societies, are denied in others. These rights should also be included in this set of well-being indicators even though they do not fall in the economic category. This argument is acceptable in the sense that life cannot be separated into economic and non-economic compartments. Most of us would not prefer to be put in prison for any considerable period even if food, clothing, shelter and healthcare provided in the prison is far superior to what we normally get outside. Therefore, it is said that, political rights and civil rights or some indicators reflecting these rights should be added to the quality of life. With increasing concern for human rights, it would be a good idea to incorporate these indicators of well-being and welfare. After all, the whole purpose of consciously developing a society is to raise the level of well-being and welfare of its people.

The idea of 'quality of life' enriches the concept of 'standard of living' which is generally thought of in terms of rich food, expensive clothing, luxuriant cars and palatial houses, often manifestation of high income. In societal terms, it is captured through per capita income. But the quality of life idea adds the dimensions, which at times may not be captured through monetary valuation.