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Will 'Sustainable Development' Live up to its Promises?: The Paradox of Human-centred Development Strategies

Authors: Annisa D. Amalia[1], Fredy Buhama Lumban Tobing[2], Riza Iskandar[3]

Summary[4]

As the international community enters the era of 'sustainable development', humanity's most existential threats persist. It provokes questions regarding the state's responsibility and the relevance of the existing development framework across the globe. The discussion implies that although security-development nexus has posited human at the core of its discourses, the practices remain paradoxical. However, the call to engage human beings as development subjects and to embrace their diverse experiences and realities has gradually diminished the disillusionment of 'development from below'.

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[1] *Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia*
[2] *Senior Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Universitas Indonesia*
[3] *Outreach/Engagement Specialist at Compact Development Team for MCC2 Program, Ministry of National Development Planning, Indonesia*

The Catchphrases: 'Human Security' and 'Sustainable Development'

Both terms of 'human security' and 'sustainable development' have been increasingly adopted in policy and academic discourses regarding responses to diverse threats to human well-beings and dignity. It is the growing concern over human's livelihoods that have forced the international community to revisit major concepts of security and development. Human security, when it was first coined, aimed at conceptualizing (in)security in a much broader sense: beyond the use of forceand crime. Today, it encompasses multiple dimensions, such as economic, food, environment, health, community and political security. Similarly, the concept of sustainable development shifts the traditional focus on economy to a more comprehensive one: the balance of social, economic and environmental sustainability—"leaving no one behind". The widely known jargons of 'freedom from want' and 'freedom from fear' further reinforce the idea that development should be accordingly planned to achieve human security.

To realize those freedoms, both 'human security' and 'sustainable development' agenda stress the collaboration between stakeholders, instead of positing the state as the primary actor—especially because human security acknowledges that the state is often the source of threat. However, as the state remains responsible for both agenda, a further scrutiny on the role of state will direct the following discussion. The use of critical approach is also considered necessary to provide an appraisal of how both concepts of 'human security' and 'sustainable development' are understood and implemented.

On State-centrism and Anxiety towards Economic Growth

With the potentials that sustainable development has promised, a question emerges as to how effective the implementation has been so far. It has been more than four decades since the term first gained recognition in 1972 at [UN Conference on the Human Environment](link) and five years since it has been recognized as the Global Goals, yet we continue to suffer from fear over three of most existential threats of humanity: [nuclear weapons, climate crisis](link), and most recently, a global disease outbreak; let alone the daunting 'development'-related challenges such as poverty and rising inequality. Sustainable development agenda seems unable to address these challenges as it leaves the state overwhelmed by the concern over economic growth and its derivative indicators.

The idea of sustainable development was developed to provide an alternative to the heavily economic-focused model which is believed to leave 'human' and 'ecological' dimensions behind. However, in its development, the idea is continuously popularized under the traditional development paradigm whereby the economic growth is still observed as the foremost concern. Although other social concerns, such as poverty and inequality are not entirely overlooked, they are simplified by the anxiety over statistics and indexes. Nonetheless, [quantifiable indicators in a neoliberal sense](link), such as income per capita, trade liberalization, investment rate, and infrastructure development remain essential to the achievement of sustainable development agenda. Quantitative indicators required by the growth-driven development mentality are indeed essential to track our progress, however, the impacts they have created towards worsening climate crisis and rising social injustice, for instance, deserve more attention.

This growth fetishism is enabled by and further reinforced through the state-centric character in sustainable development agenda. State remains the key actor to dictate development priorities and strategies. In Indonesia, for instance, it is state officials who exert control over how development goals are interpreted and implemented. The government believes that infrastructure development serves as the main engine of growth which will contribute to an increasing economic independence for Indonesian society. During Covid-19 pandemic, despite intense criticisms from academia, health experts and civil society, Indonesia's government has continued to demonstrate its economy-focused responses. The 'new normal' slogan is constantly familiarized amid the growing number of daily new cases of Covid-19 and despite an assessment that the slogan and its practices tacitly serve as a exclusionary and disenfranchising policy. To keep the economy running and recovering, the poor and marginalized communities who hardly acquire sufficient information and access to adapt in the so-called 'new era' are sacrificed. This event is an epitome of paradox of development strategy where we continue to witness, in one hand, the drive for an optimum increase in economic growth, which, on the other hand, leads to the potential of rising gaps between the rich and poor further leading to the deeper problem of social justice.

Furthermore, the sense that both 'sustainable development' agenda remain the responsibility of the state, bolsters its paternalist nature. The state remains powerful to decide and dictate which policy and practice are desirable for the good of its citizens. The critical problem, then, is that the state has the legitimation to utilize its biopolitical power to put people as objects of control and regularization—which could amount to the invocation of certain rights and freedom of the people. Empowerment strategy could render its objects disempowered since the state's capacity to interpret and understand its citizens' interests and aspirations is limited. Thus, one issue arises is: while sustainable development agenda aims to bring 'human' back in, to what extent are human beings have fundamentally been regarded as active subjects, not merely passive objects, in its implementation? To what extent it works towards functioning 'development from below' in a way that it empowers the people, help them to be aware of their rights, and be capable in fulfilling their responsibilities?

Rethinking the Neoliberal Politics

The state-centric and growth-focused character of sustainable development agenda is highly related to the context where this agenda is developed. It has been widely recognized and criticized that the idea is shaped by the neoliberal paradigm established by the global North. Hence, the state's views on 'development' and 'security' are also influenced by such paradigm. Proponents of neoliberalism reinforces the notion of market essentialism in sustainable development, as if it is possible for economic growth as well as free market and privatization run harmoniously with 'sustainability'.

While neoliberalism is believed to reduce the state's role on economy, it has also paved a way for state to practice a strategy of exclusion in the name of economic development. It is not surprising that the accused 'weak' and 'failed' states have begun to encounter challenges related to undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, trans-border shadow economies and criminal networks who are perceived as the 'dangerous' population in need of 'governing' practices,

while the problem of inequality nurtured by the development paradigm is systematically overlooked. Moreover, since these issues are mostly found in the global South, the development framework has enabled the global North to 'interfere' by encouraging global partnerships—either between states, or within International Financial Institutions (IFIs). Among the most notable examples for this 'intervention' is the role of World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in financing and supervising development projects in global South—making them 'development expertise'. For critical development scholars, this approach serves as a containment strategy where IFIs become substitutes for corrupt and weak states in global South to provide aid and assistance for their 'development' processes—to be able to resolve their problems within their own territories. The underlying problem with this strategy is the view that sustainable development is a global unifying agenda deemed applicable to all countries. Meanwhile, development assistances by Western-led IFIs have been widely criticized for its failure to take into account the different socio-political dynamics of the global South, resulted in unequal growth and political discontents.

There have been some cases where the global South demonstrates a varying degree of resistance. In Indonesia, for instance, its Ministry of National Development Planning has developed a guideline to thoroughly evaluate whether a specific aid/assistance is relevant for Indonesian context and its people's needs. This guideline aims to reject technical assistance offers potentially functioning as lending schemes and navigate the donor-recipient power relations. In the current development project with Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a US grant program, the stakeholders have engaged civil society since its initial stage based on the engagement guideline. Meanwhile, aside from mainstream Western-led IFIs, other actors such as Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) has also expanded its development strategy to finance and assist development projects across developing countries in global South. In Indonesia, IsDB has supported a number of social infrastructure development projects in health and education sectors. *Kotaku* (*Kota Tanpa Kumuh*) program is another remarkable achievement of IsDB-financed project in Indonesia which has empowered local communities based on their own potentials and needs. These cases add to the importance of South-South cooperation scheme, which is envisaged as a resistance to the domination of global North in development discourses and strategy. However, it remains to be seen whether this scheme could serve as an alternative approach to the prevailing neoliberal development agenda sustained.

In Search of Alternatives: A Post-Development Wave?

The discussion above has demonstrated the incapability of the state to execute sustainable development agenda with human security approach. This is including the states in the Global South, despite the fact that human security concerns are growing here. However, the sense of responsibility carried by the state has rendered it trapped in a state-centric character, and thus limits it to develop a sustainable development framework which requires them to be more responsive to the needs of the people. The framework barely cuts ties with the economic nature of developments, leading to two implications: 1) justifying the state's power to treat people as their objects of control, and 2) rising economic and social inequality within and between countries. To address these challenges, post-development theorists have advocated for

reshaping development discourses and practices beyond the logic of Western neoliberalism, where people are actively engaged in the process and the ['diverse and dynamic reality'] of human experiences are taken into account. Relevant initiatives found in the global South, including Indonesia, should be welcome and supported in the spirit of realizing a more sustained and human-centred development: a promise that must be kept.***