

**REFLECTIONS ON SIX DECADES OF THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT:
EVALUATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT

The concept of development has undergone significant changes over the past half a century. Many scholars and practitioners have defined the concept differently based on their philosophy, purpose, context and time. This study reviews the evolution of development approaches and focus since the 1950s. The study explores current thinking and discussions on the concept and further presents an evaluation of the concept of development within the sustainable development context as well as future research priorities. The paper adopts a secondary data analysis technique by reviewing and analyzing both old and current knowledge in published literature. Over 60 publications were reviewed and analyzed for this study. The paper asserts that, in order to understand and apply the concept to different geographical regions, development should be understood as a relative rather than an absolute concept. It shows the iterative process of the concept and further establishes the importance of human wellbeing in achieving sustainable development.

Keywords: Development, Economic growth, Human wellbeing, Sustainable Development, Multidimensional phenomenon

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'development' dates back to the 19th century and has been used in several fields including natural sciences, social sciences and physical sciences (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1994; Cliché, 2005). For instance, in the natural sciences, it was used by Aristotle to explain the nature of all things that develop, and Charles Darwin in his theory of evolution of species (Cliche, 2005). However, in the field of social sciences, the concept of development emerged during the 1950s and 1960s following the end of the World War II (Harris, 2000; Hettne, 2002). Accordingly, the concept has been associated with many disciplines such as economic development (Todaro, 2000), social development (Seers, 1969), human development (UNDP, 1990), sustainable development (Adams, 2006), and development as freedom (Sen, 1999).

Unquestionably, the concept development is a multidimensional phenomenon which has been hotly debated globally (Thomas, 2004; Todaro, 2000). Recent literature cites over 500 publications on the various aspects, focus and application of the concept of development. Many scholars have described the concept as an 'unstable concept' being both an urgent global challenge and a vibrant theoretical field for achieving an ideal future or a destructive myth (Edelman & Haugerud, 2005), a 'contextual concept' focusing on western and other cultures (Rist, 1997), a 'binary concept' in terms of developed and developing countries (Hettne, 2002), a 'European Enlightenment' a period during which the foundations of modern science and technology, together with rational and liberal ideologies of progress and development, were laid down (Osborne, 2001) and 'modernity' emphasising constant pursuit of progress in human wellbeing (Giddens, 2003; Jones, 1993). Several theories have also been developed over the past 50 years to explain development patterns and process. Theories of development such as modernisation theory, dependency theory, social justice theory and human capital theory (Blomstrom & Hettne, 1984; Preston, 1996; Rapley, 1996) have evolved over the past six decades to give explanations to the wellbeing of people, nations and regions. Additionally, discussions on the concept of development have been debated within the sustainable development context focusing on environmental, social and economic factors (Adams, 2006; Fergus & Rowney, 2005; Lele, 1991; UNESCO, 2005).

There is, however, limited literature reviewed on the historical perspective of the concept of development and factors causing the change of focus (Herath, 2009; Remenyi, 2004; Sant' Ana, 2008; Simon, 1997; Szirmai, 2000). The historical evolution and the underlying factors informing different focus of development over the past six decades are critical in shaping current debate on the concept of development. An analysis by Remenyi (2004) on the evolution of development concept focus on thoughts of development, paying little attention to the focus and challenges of the various objectives of the concept. In 2008, Sant' Ana (2008) attempts to establish the historical evolution of the concept of development but however emphasized human development rather than the broader development concept. Herath (2009) and Simon (1997) establish the historical perspective of development by focusing on the various theories of development. It must however be stated that the historical progression of the concept of development emphasises approaches for improving the quality of human life and achieving sustainable development. This paper presents a reflection on the concept of development by focusing on how the concept has evolved over the years and factors informing its evolution. The paper further presents current discussions on the concept especially within the sustainable development context, and an evaluation of the recent debate on the concept of development and future research priorities.

METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

This analysis is based on the review of old and recent knowledge in available literature. It establishes the evolution of the concept and is well founded in the literature on the concept of development and sustainable development. In addition, it highlights where there are disagreement and differences of opinion regarding the conceptualisation of the concept in recent discussion. Two main approaches were used in this study: (1) Analysis of peer-reviewed and edited literature from published sources such as books and journal articles. Various terms relating to the concept were employed in undertaking the web search in major electronic databases such as Academic search complete, SAGE Journals online, JSTOR and CABI, as well as catalogues from the Australian Library. Access to these was secured using the resources of the Charles Sturt University. (2) Furthermore, there was an assessment of published documents (reports) from major international organisations which are into development, sustainability and related issues. Published documents were obtained from organisations such as the World Bank, United Nations (UN), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Literature obtained from these two sources/approaches was mainstreamed to focus on research or cases that provided relevant evidence to the subject being reviewed. About 60 published documents including peer reviewed articles and books were reviewed for this study.

EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

The idea of 'development' emerged in the second half of the twentieth century (Harris, 2000) and has traditionally been interpreted as 'economic growth' which is measured by per capita income and average annual growth in national income (World Bank, 1980). Gore (2000) asserts that the economic focus of development in the 1950s and 1960s was a vision of liberating people, through structural transformation. This 'growth-based' understanding of development, according to Sant'Ana (2008), was premised on the idea that growth of the economy would benefit the whole society, either by market-driven 'trickle down' effects, or by state-driven social policy. However, Harris (2000) indicates that the benefits of the 'economic concept' of development did not necessarily trickle down to the poor as the inequality gap between the poor and the rich widened especially in Africa. Little consideration was given to the evolution of other factors, such as inequality, poverty and social wellbeing (Sant'Ana, 2008). Several researchers and international organizations (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2006) have argued that the economic concept of development does not define the true meaning of development because it fails to consider individual's physical capabilities and conditions.

In the 1970s, the focus of development shifted from economic growth and gross domestic product (GDP) to 'basic needs' (Streeten, Burki, Ul Haq, Hicks, & Stewart, 1981). The central components of the basic needs approach included education, nutrition, health, sanitation and employment for the poor (Harris, 2000; Seers, 1969). This new focus of development was characterized by relatively less concern with economic indicators, but emphasized the quality of human life and conservation of the natural environment. It is further indicated by Harris (2000) that this approach stimulated "the creation of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index, which uses health and education measures together with Gross Domestic Product (GDP)" to examine progress of development (p. 3). This concept of human welfare is also concerned with 'redistribution with growth' (distribution of benefits/wealth of development among individuals, groups and regions) and became popular after the Cocoyoc Declaration in Mexico (Ghai, 1977). The Cocoyoc Declaration states:

"Our first concern is to redefine the whole purpose of development. This should not be to develop things but to develop man. Man has basic needs – food, shelter, clothing, health and education. Any process of growth that does not lead to their fulfillment or even worse, - disrupts them is a travesty of the idea of development" (Ghai 1977, p.6).

Seers (1969), concerned with increasing inequality between the rich countries and the poor countries, remarked that a country's development can be determined when the state of poverty, unemployment and inequality is significantly reduced. Seers (1969) further adds that a country cannot claim to be developed when factors such as poverty, unemployment, inequality are worsening, even if per capita income doubles.

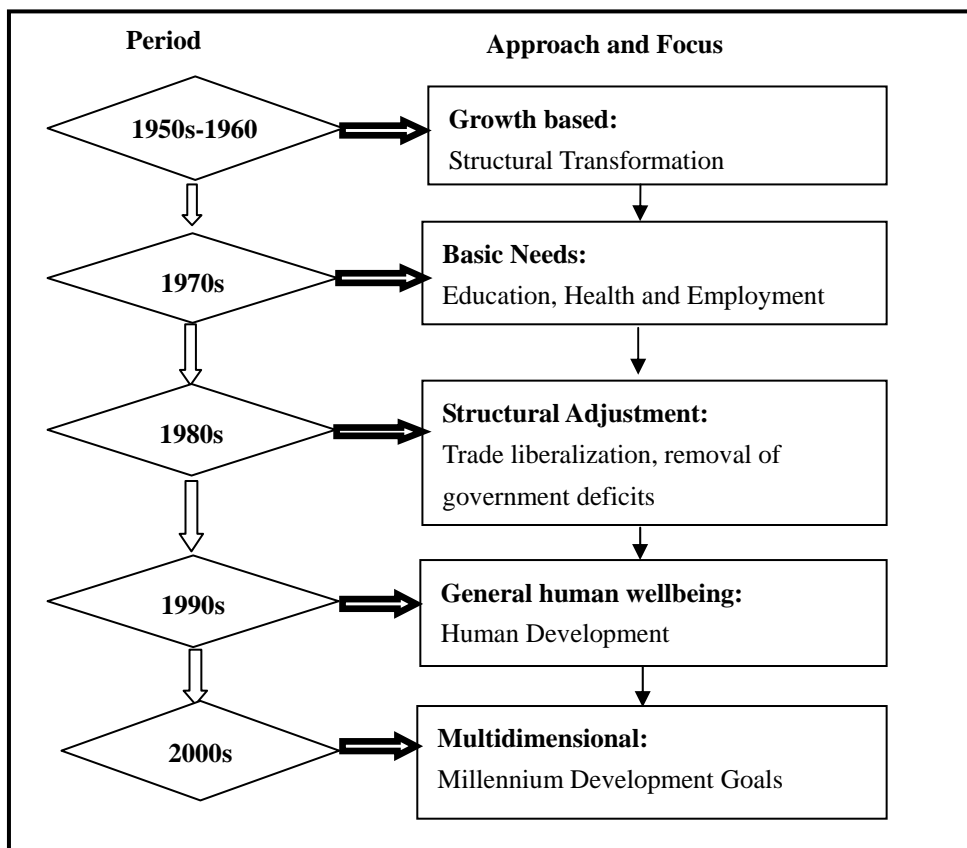
The 1980s was characterised by a dramatic turn in the development focus. The debt crisis of the 1980s displaced the centre of gravity in development thinking from the United Nations' organs such as the UN Research Institute for Social Development and the UN Conference on Trade and Development, to the Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank, IMF and other related organs of the UN) (Sant'Ana, 2008). The concept of development during this period focused on 'structural adjustment', emphasising liberalization of trade, elimination of government deficits and overvalued exchange rates as well as dismantling inefficient parastatal organizations (Harris, 2000). According to Harris (2000, p. 3) "structural adjustment was seen as correcting the errors of earlier, government-centred development policies which had led to bloated bureaucracies, unbalanced budgets, and excessive debt". Several researchers and organisations, however, expressed their dissatisfaction with the structural adjustment approach (Seers, 1969; UNDP, 1990), as they found it to be at variance with the basic needs concept of development. Market-oriented reforms adopted led to greater inequality and

hardship for the poor even as economic efficiency improved (Harris, 2000).

The UNDP's *World Development Report 1990*, offered a different interpretation to the concept of development following global agitations for better indicators of development. Focusing on the general wellbeing of people, the UNDP (1990) defines development as a process of enlarging peoples' choices, and these choices are available to individuals who could lead long and healthy lives, acquire knowledge and have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. Even though the UNDP (1990) admits that income is an important indicator of development, it is not an 'end' in itself (Sen, 1999). Development goes beyond the expansion of income and wealth, and focuses on the welfare of people (UNDP, 1990). This notion of development as 'human centred' overcame the limitations of the economic growth-based concept of development which viewed income as an 'end' in itself instead of a 'means' to an 'end' (Sant'Ana, 2008).

In 2000, development was globally viewed as multidimensional in both conceptualisation and reality (Fukuda-Parr, 2003; Thomas, 2004; Todaro, 2000). The shift in discourse from economic conceptualisation to human development indices entailed far more than a formal renaming of the concept (Sant'Ana, 2008). The introduction of gender empowerment measure (to encourage the participation of women and minority groups in economic, political and professional lives especially in developing countries), protection of the natural environment and the eradication of poverty dominated international debate on development (UNDP, 1995; UN, 2000). This period also witnessed a global commitment to improve the quality of life of people through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which has become a development indicator in many countries in Africa including Ghana. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the concept of development.

Figure 1: Evolution of the Concept of Development from 1950s –2000s



CURRENT DISCUSSIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

Although development has been a constant concern of governments, policymakers, economists and other social scientists both in the developed and the developing countries, there has been little agreement on what constitutes development (UNDP, 1990), with the concept being highly contested both theoretically and politically (Thomas, 2004). The inherent complexity and ambiguity of the concept have led many researchers to give different interpretations based on their philosophies and geographical locations (Fukuda-Parr, 2003; Myint, 1980; Myrdal, 1974; Sen, 1999; Thomas, 2004). This section however highlights the current discussions on the conceptualisations of development offered by different authors from 2000 to 2010 and further establishes the common variables informing their interpretations.

Highlighting on structural transformation as a form of development, Thomas (2004) defines the concept of development as a structural change in society involving long term transformation of society. This concept of development is referred to as a process of historical change due to the long term change. Hickey and Mohan (2003), however, disagree with Thomas' (2004) conceptualization of development and argue that increasing international discourse on the concept has resulted in a shift of focus from development being synonymous with structural change to development as a short term

assessment of progress focusing on improvement in human wellbeing, disregarding the multidimensional nature of the concept.

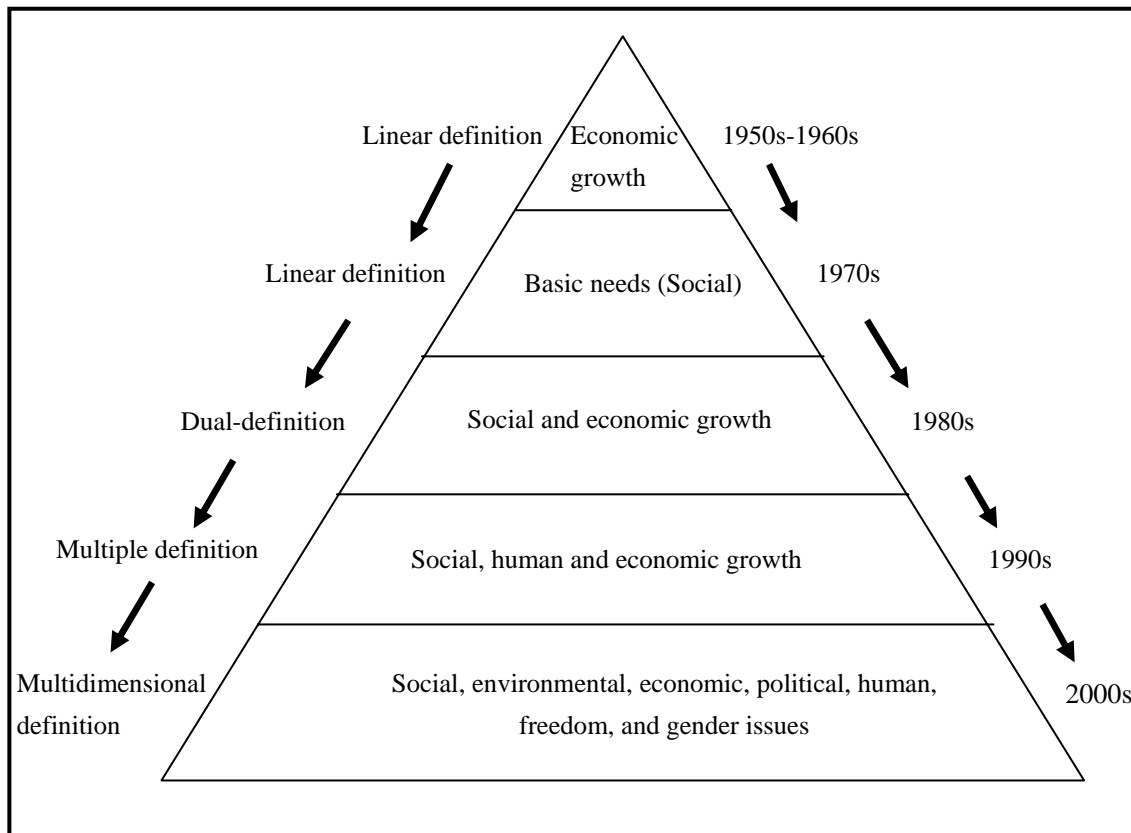
From the socio-economic perspective, Herath (2009) supports Myrdal (1974) and Furtado (1977) interpretation of development. Myrdal (1974), for instance, explains development as the upward movement of the entire social system including economic and non-economic factors. The economic factors include employment and job opportunities while education, health, distribution of power, social and political stratifications constitute non-economic factors. He indicates that development will only result when there is effective growth and interplay between economic and non-economic factors. The concept of development is multifaceted and it encompasses several dimensions such as efficient production system, provision of society's basic needs and efficient use of resources in satisfying individual needs (Furtadao, 1977). Broadening the socio-economic perspective of development, Herath (2009) argues that the interpretation of the concept of development should include culture characteristics and be sensitive to the local context in which the concept is being applied. Herath (2009) further indicates that development should be refined to include a wide variety of human needs, which Sen (1999) refers to as freedom. According to Sen (1999) development should be perceived as freedom and further explain the concept as process of expanding the freedom people enjoy, adding that the narrower views of development such as identifying development with growth in gross national product and increase in personal income are very important means of expanding the freedom enjoyed by society, but not an end in themselves. Sen (1999) identifies the expansion of education, health, political and civil rights to be socio-economic determinants of development as freedom. An observation made by Fukuda-Parr (2003) by comparing the real income, basic needs and human development perspectives of development revealed that the evolution in the prioritization of capabilities is a corresponding shift in focus from social and economic policies to a wider political institutions and processes with greater emphasis on participation.

Accordingly, evidence suggests that the concept of development has been explained and interpreted in response to poverty alleviation (Blaikie, 2000; Chambers, 2004; Potter, Binns, Elliot & Smith, 2004). These evidences support Myint's (1980) claim that the term development addresses poverty alleviation in two folds: the fight against poverty and the analysis of long term economic and social development. To Myint (1980), the fight against poverty approach focuses on short term measures of alleviating widespread poverty, hunger and misery, while the analysis of long term economic and social development compares socio-economic development between and among regions, countries and historical periods to establish the underlying factors impeding long term socio-economic development. The concept of

development was expanded to include prospects such as creation of employment opportunities, availability of basic needs and political participation, to overcome increasing inequality and human deprivation between individuals and regions (UN, 2000).

Fukuda-Parr (2003) summarizes the arguments on the concept of development by categorizing the different conceptualizations based on current global discourse. He states that the economic concept which focuses on efficiency has dominated the current debates on 'good' governance (responsible political system), while "the human development approach is concerned with governance for social justice; a governance that enlarges the participation, power, and influence of the people, especially those who are disadvantaged such as women, ethnic minorities, and the poor" (p. 308). An observation of the above discussions on the concept of development unearths that development is multidimensional and it encompasses many variables. Accordingly, discussions on development reveal that the concept was uni-dimensionally viewed in the 1950s and 1960s focusing on economic growth. However, the concept became multidimensional when other variables other than economic growth were considered. Today, the concept of development encompasses all spheres of human wellbeing: social, economic, political, environmental, and gender issues as enshrined in the global efforts in improving human wellbeing (MDGs). Figure 2 shows the progression from linear nature to multidimensional nature of the concept of development. However, the multidimensional variables of the concept of development have been categorized into three groups within the sustainable development context focusing on environmental, social and economic factors. The next section explores the concept of sustainable development within the development discourse.

Figure 2: Progression Pyramid of the Concept of Development



EXPLORING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT IN THE DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

Although the concept of sustainable development has been globally embraced and debated within the broader context of development, it lacks clear interpretation as to what constitutes sustainable development (Lele, 1991). Discussions on sustainable development dates back to the earliest examples of city planning and traditional agricultural systems but became popular over the past three decades, and embraces issues of the environment, people and the economic systems (Swarbrooke, 1998). The idea of sustainable development, according to Cobb (1992), was rejuvenated by the World Council of Churches during its 1975 Assembly in Nairobi-Kenya, which was concerned with justice in the distribution and use of resources (Todorov & Marinova, 2009). The concept was, however, first defined by the Brundtland Commission as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987, p. 43). WCED (1987) stated that the definition contains within it two key concepts: (1) the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and (2) the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. The concept had among

its objectives to ensure the availability of adequate resources for the population; equitable distribution of resources, economic development as well as environmental protection for the benefit of both present and future generations (Malcom, 1994).

The debate on sustainable development was intensified in 2000 through the adoption of the MDGs by the United Nations' General Assembly. Subsequently, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 further expanded the standard definition (Brundtland Commission's definition) with the widely used three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz, 2005). The World Summit tackled the limitations regarding socio-economic development and environmental framework, especially in developing countries, within which the concept operates, and further created a common platform for developing and strengthening the pillars of sustainable development (economic development, social development and environmental protection) so as to make them mutually reinforcing at the local, national, regional and global levels (The Johannesburg Declaration, 2002).

Diesendorf (2000) indicates that sustainable development comprises all types of economic and social development which protect and enhance the natural environment and ensures social equity. Sustainable development, thus, seeks to resolve conflict between "the various competing goals, and involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity famously referred to as three dimensions with the resultant vector being technology" (Hasna, 2007, p. 48). In 2001, OECD provided a technical interpretation of sustainable development by defining the concept as a development process which ensures the maximisation of human wellbeing for today's generations without causing a decline in future wellbeing (OECD, 2001). This definition emphasises the multidimensional nature of development and highlights the importance of retaining some level of control to respond to future shocks, even when their probability, and the scale and location of their impacts, cannot be determined with certainty.

The notion of sustainable development has gained a broader political usage, with issues of human wellbeing being enshrined in international documents such as the UNDP Human Development Report and the MDGs (OECD, 2001; UN, 2000; UNDP, 1990). Components of human wellbeing included access to clean air and water, adequate diet, adequate dwellings, personal security both physical and emotional, opportunities for learning, opportunities for cooperative small-group interaction, an emotional support network, opportunities for creative behaviour, and an environment and lifestyle which do not promote a sense of alienation, of anomie, of being deprived, of boredom, of loneliness or of

chronic frustration especially in Africa and Asia (Boyden & Dovers, 1997). Stemming from the above components of human wellbeing, Newman and Rowe (2003, p. 24) conceptualise sustainable development “as meeting the needs of current and future generations through integration of environmental protection, social advancement, and economic prosperity”. The integration of these elements have made sustainable development the fulcrum around which domestic and regional policy formulation revolves, in addition to international relations between countries in the 21st century (OECD, 2001). Sustainable development should be understood as a process of change that is heavily reliant upon local contexts, needs, and priorities (UNESCO, 2005).

The concept of sustainable development has been debated in relation to the developed and the developing world as a result of the different levels of development attained and desired (Osofsky, 2004). According to Bryner (1999), the level of growth already attained by developed countries has generated major environmental problems, and that it will generate more environmental concerns if the developing countries are allowed to pass through the same process. Consequently, Bryner (1999) asserts that this approach is unfair to the developing countries. Further to that, Osofsky (2004) argues that over population and increasing consumption are threats to sustainable development, and that the developed countries having relatively stable populations but high per capita consumption threatens sustainable development. The developed world also argues that the developing countries in Africa and Asia are characterised by rapid population growth which is detrimental to sustainable development, but with relatively low per capita consumption (Osofsky 2004). The developed and the developing countries therefore tend to be divided on the factors that threaten sustainability.

It is against this complex background and varied interpretations that Todorov and Marinova (2009) indicate there is the need to conceptualise and measure the progress humanity is making towards becoming sustainable instead of battling with the various explanations of the concept. Development is therefore sustainable when it is continual, with its benefits being maintained indefinitely (Munro, 1995). This suggests that there must be no inhibiting factor in the process concerned that would limit the time it can endure, as well as being worthwhile, meeting social, economic and environmental objectives (Munro, 1995). Pearce and Atkinson (1998, p. 3), being concerned with the worsening state of poverty especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, contest that the emphasis on future generations in the globally embraced definition (Brundtland Commission’s definition) of sustainable development was “only part of the story”, and that meeting the needs of the poor should be the highest priority. Pearce and Atkinson (1998) add that the claim for future generational needs cannot be met if the present generation, especially the poor, are not better educated, not involved in decision making and do not have control over resources. It is both useless and an insult to the poor, if they are to remain

in poverty in order to protect the environment, and that poverty and underdevelopment challenges cannot be overcome unless there is a shift in sustainable development focus, to one where developing countries play an active role and enjoy enormous benefits (WCED, 1987).

EVALUATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The multidimensional nature of the development concept makes it impossible to apply one interpretation to different regions and to different groups of people. There are three factors to be considered in understanding and implementing the concept of development in different parts of the world. First, development should be viewed as relative rather than absolute concept. This implies that the concept should be explained and understood from the local situation rather than the adoption of a general interpretation. An example is how the concept has been interpreted based on the level of progress made by geographical regions (developed and developing countries). While the concept of development is linked to modernization and civilization in developed countries, developing countries, such as Ghana, interpret development as poverty reduction or alleviation strategy. This also supports Herath (2009) assertion that the explanation and understanding of the concept should be context specific and culturally sensitive. Herath (2009) adds that local indicators of development should be adopted at local level while globally accepted indicators should be used at national and international levels. This issue of relative explanation to development does not involve any technical difficulties; it is basically problems of definitions.

The second factor in understanding the interpretation of the concept of development however involves technical difficulties, and it is essentially philosophical issue. The discussions on the concept of development have been dominated by scholars and practitioners with different philosophies and purposes. For instance, researchers with economic background only focus on the economic dimensions of development with little or no consideration to the other aspects of development. Although it is important to understand the concept from different perspectives, it should be emphasized that the focus on one dimension of development does not portray the true meaning of the multidimensional nature of the concept. This is a technical issue that has governed and shaped discussions on the concept, as well as being the cause of failure for many development approaches over the past six decades. It is therefore important to consider the various interpretations of the concept and further continue to explore all necessary factors that are necessary for the growth and wellbeing of society.

Thirdly, the concept of development should be understood as a process but not an end state. Assessment of the evolution

and the definitions of the development indicate that development is a process which continually incorporates different dimensions of human wellbeing with the ultimate aim of ensuring sustainability. Additionally, Herath (2009) asserts that the concept of development should not be viewed as linear process, but rather as an iterative process, as it has been revised several times to incorporate different dimensions. Understanding and applying the concept of development requires a careful assessment of the past approaches and the current situation in order to inform the future approach. Understanding development as a process provides researchers and practitioners the platform to broaden the scope of development approaches to respond to human needs. The concept of development should therefore be viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon and a sustainable process which is applicable to different geographical settings or regions. The major research priority areas include the exploration of the relative understanding of the concept of development within and among different geographical regions. Another research area is to examine how the process of development can be made sustainable in different parts of the world especially in Africa. These research areas will help figure out the future focus of development approaches and their role in achieving sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the evolution of the concept of development, the major approaches and focus of the concept, current discourse and the evaluation of the concept within the sustainable development thinking. The meaning of development has undergone constant and considerable alteration to include different human needs. Early researchers were more concerned with economic growth in terms of GDP growth and physical infrastructure expansion. Following the debate on the inadequacies of the economic indicators of development by scholars and practitioners, this approach to development has been broadened to incorporate social, cultural, environmental and political factors necessary for human wellbeing. Today, human wellbeing and the environment are at the center of development discourse. The understanding and emphasis of human wellbeing in development discourse is important in informing decision making and determining future policy direction especially in developing countries.

Situating the concept of sustainable development within the broader context of development discussions, there has been a constant concern regarding the state of poverty especially in developing countries. Understanding the poverty situation and ways of improving the living conditions of the poor in developing countries are critical factors in achieving sustainable development. Supporting Pearce and Atkinson (1998), sustainable development cannot be achieved when the current generation is in abject poverty. A conscious effort to improve the living conditions of the poor is important in ensuring environmental protection, improving economic development and achieving social equity.

The continual addition to and expansion of the multidimensional concept of development requires a careful assessment and incorporation of the past and current situations to determine the bearing on the future generation. Development, and for that matter sustainable development, thinking especially in Africa should be geared towards improving the lots of the poor through quality education, employment opportunities, good health, political participation, creation of environmental awareness and the initiation of locally oriented development programmes. Evaluation of the various development approaches over the past six decades reveals that the major challenge of these approaches has been the existence of weak institutional framework. Ensuring sustainable development especially in Africa demands strong institutions to implement policies and enforce legislations which are indispensable in improving the wellbeing of the poor.

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