

# Peace and Social Justice: A Social Work Commitment for Sustainable Development

Andleeb Said\*

## Abstract

Peace and social justice are a pre-requisite for development to ensue, and continue. Development is not only an economic phenomenon but entails a multi-dimensional process that involves reorganisation of economic and social systems. Conditions that allow it to happen and sustain are provided by a peaceful and just social and political order. Contemporary political conflicts may be spawned by different reasons but the experience of living in such situations, the pain and agony, is something that connects the victims of different conflicts to one another. Conflicts cause death and devastation, a situation of chaos and confusion, and hopelessness. Violence becomes a routine and negatively impacts the social, economic and cultural ties of people. Violence affected societies become susceptible to further brutalities as the social linkages and relationships are broken down. The affected communities tend to resist the unnatural changes and refuse to give in to anxiety and strain by adopting different survival strategies. This paper argues that a strong social work commitment is required in politically and socially conflict ridden societies. Developing and re-developing the fractured civil societies, networking between voluntary organisations and government agencies and building civilian platforms for peace negotiations and pursuit of just solutions are some of the initiatives that can help and support the resilience that the civilian population displays in the wake of mayhem. It is pertinent to support their efforts to help achieve a sustainable development in conflict ridden societies. The current discourse rests on a rights based approach that deems social justice, freedoms and peace a necessity for social and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Peace, Social Justice, Social Work, Resilience

## Introduction

The concept of Sustainable development has been approached in terms of ecology and economy so far.

Different definitions with different connotations have been given and the issues and challenges to the concept explained by various national and international bodies, and individuals. The biggest contribution came from Bruntland Commission that defined Sustainable development as, "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission, 1987: 8). This approach to development talks about an invisible inter-generational deal that flows from the idea that the future generation has a right to all the natural resources and that it is the responsibility of the current generation to let these resources pass on to them peacefully. Safeguarding the right of the future generation to inherit the natural resources and responsibility of the current generation to preserve, renew and rehabilitate these resources requires political as well as individual will.

The current development paradigm takes a materialistic view of the world focussing on growth of economies with every developed and developing country jumping into the fray without weighing the consequences of such unplanned and random growth. Political and commercial establishments are busy in attempting an increase in production and a search for new markets to sell the swelled production of goods. This race for 'infinite growth' undoubtedly causes an exploitation of available resources and a look out for hidden natural resources, and hence an imbalance in the ecosystem.

The design and pace of development being experienced today makes the idea of sustainability look remote. In such a scheme of things people are experiencing changes in their lifestyles and as is said rich are getting richer and poor are getting poorer. The sustainability would require "...the well being of a defined population should be at least constant over time, and, preferable, increasing for there to be sustainable development" writes Pearce et. al. (1989: 32).

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India.  
Email: saidandleeb@gmail.com

## Socio-cultural Costs of Development

The development debate cannot be held a hostage to environmental concerns only. While its primary impact is on environment, the socio-cultural consequences cannot be ignored. The mode and process of development that we are following currently is negatively impacting the fine social fabric of communities. The urbanisation and commercialization that has accompanied industrialization and development process is affecting social interaction and relationship patterns. The loosened social bonds are creating what Sharma calls 'an alienated individual' where a person's life revolves around eking out his/her livelihood and the process consumes his/her time and hence life (Sharma, 1996:25). The life in developed countries shows a contrary relationship with social systems and institutions. The sense of belonging to the community and to the family has declined significantly.

Another development outcome is the widening of socio-economic disparities among the people of the same state as well as cross-nationally. The present concept of sustainable development has a serious flaw, writes Sharma (1996:23). He says, "A disconcerting feature of the present scenario is the wide disparity in the control and use of natural resources between developed and developing nations, the former having much larger control than the latter." The fact that industrialized nations are consuming a larger share of world's resources and contribute to higher amount of emissions but seek that entire world be held responsible and made pay for it, came under sharp criticism in the Earth Summit.

A large number of development projects have resulted in the displacements of populations causing them immense pain. They lost their lands, homes, and sense of an integrated community. Many of them continue to struggle for their survival as their livelihoods were lost. More development means more emissions into atmosphere and air, water and soil pollutions. As the world is caught into the mad rush of development the diseases and disorders are wiping out populations. With each day passing a new threat to the species of human beings is discovered. The new Zika virus outbreak in Central America is a glaring example of how these threats are not limited to poor nations but the entire world is vulnerable to them. The health woes are no longer a problem of few, these too are globalized.

The current paradigm of development is also responsible for, what can be called cultural globalisation. With global South being underdeveloped and the North consuming major portion of natural resources, the resource distribution is skewed. The developed countries have reached the zenith of the process while the underdeveloped countries are far from catching up. A cultural supremacy of these nations has evolved because of this huge gap and they are constantly seeking to impose it on the rest of the world seriously undermining the diverse indigenous cultures. The cultures in the global North are considered to be civilized while those of the South are barbaric that need to be changed. The development process has "sidelined culture by bringing economy to the centre stage as a measure of development" writes Sharma (1996:25). The displacement of indigenous cultures and a constant attempt at replacing them with the so-called civilized cultures is further dividing the people and will soon cause the latent discontent manifest into conflicts and wars.

Ashish Nandy talks about how the hierarchy of states of consciousness and the different ways of living that people have evolved or adopted have lead to the use of inferior terms like underdeveloped or third world countries (Nandy, 1989). The uses of such terms in itself denigrate civilizations, cultures, social systems, traditions, beliefs and systems of knowledge.

The present discourse is trying to focus on the façade of development that lays the basis for conflicts and wars by creating disharmony and discontent in the society.

## Development: A Struggle

The process of development is a complex one as it involves a lot of planning and resource over utilization. The outcome is equally complex as it dents the resource base and hence the environment. Developmental course is usually understood in terms of socio-economic development which is responsible for enhancing the standard of living. While this notion of development is supposed to be comprehensive, a strict difference between 'socio-economic development' and 'integral development' is emerging. H. de la Costa (1970) argues, "Development, it is argued, cannot be limited simply to raising per capita incomes and industrializing economies. Development must include the whole human person, the whole range of human activities, or else it is not development at all".

Development is a value-laden concept whose concern is to enhance the material and social good of society. The concept of Social development has broadly come to mean improving the well-being of communities by augmenting the quality as well as the quantity of social and services like education, health, water supply and all that is required to lead a healthy and comfortable life.

Freedom is a pre-requisite for social or integral development. Liberation of thought and action, freedom from slavery and oppression and multiple limitations is the actual development that the world should look at. The Asian Ecumenical Conference for Development concluded, “Wherever human life is oppressed, enslaved and dehumanized there is underdevelopment”. Thus, the process of development encompasses deliverance from oppression, suppression and dehumanization. It is development if it makes life meaningful for those marginalized, socially, economically and politically. Rajeshwar Prasad writes that the Latin American theologians equate ‘liberation’ with development in the context of Latin American countries (in Srivastava, 1998:89). They find the notion of liberation more meaningful than development. Prasad further argues that the liberation perspective puts a condition of freedom for all (1998). He forwards three basic assumptions behind this perspective. First, working populations in underdeveloped countries are not free. Second, freedoms of people are inhibited by several factors, all of which are not apparent, including those identified as instruments of ‘deliverance’ rather than the instruments of ‘injustice and oppression’ which they in point of fact are. Third, people can take care of their own development and hence destinies, if set free from all the limitations. They are capable of working towards the achievement of a meaningful life. Development is, thus, seen as a struggle against the limitations imposed by the economic and social system and the injustices perpetrated by them.

## **Wars and Conflicts: A Challenge to World Order**

The present-day world is marred by intra-state conflicts and inter-state wars. The wars and conflicts are inflicting heavy material and immaterial harms on people. The fine fabric of societies is damaged and the thin line between combatants and non-combatants does not exist now as the fighting is not done on battlefields anymore. The wars are now fought on the doorsteps of homes and with the

use of sophisticated weaponry and technology it has the potential of inflicting pain and destruction. The level of development achieved so far by these nations is reduced to a naught.

It is pertinent to examine the relationship between sustainable development and peace here and before venturing into that quest the roots of armed conflicts in modern day societies need to be located.

“There is a clear and distinct shift in the emerging discourse on conflict analysis from the traditional warfare-military contests between nation-states to defend their territorial integrity and independence to the ‘new wars’ or intra-state conflicts, where the state is only one among the many other players in a conflict that includes guerrilla groups, ethnically mobilized armies and mercenaries” (Bahera, 2006). A political conflict provokes government retaliation leading to forms of repression, police measures, legal instruments, such as preventive detention, human rights violations, arrests etc. In extreme, but not infrequent cases, political conflicts have resulted in the collapse of state institutions. The legal system breaks down, extortion and murder take place with impunity and normal operations in the society cease to function. This is the case of state failure.

An intense political conflict leads to breaking up of existing social relationships. Families may be divided, friendships are destroyed and local communities are shattered. Socially and psychologically they are more devastating than many interstate wars. In extreme cases political conflicts can also turn into full-fledged wars.

Territorial conflicts have always been central to interstate conflicts. The state depends on its military for the control of the territory, and state security also often depends on control over particular areas. Such areas are defined as strategic or vital and come to justify military action. The same is true for internal conflicts. If particular groups claim control over certain areas and want to change their status, it affects the inhabitants of the state as a whole. It might mean drawing new borders and altering the established rights of all citizens. It impacts on access to particular areas and has implications for control over resources. The government of a state is likely to be equally conservative with respect to the territory it is set to administer. Challenges are likely to be taken seriously and so territorial issues acquire a particular meaning in internal affairs.

Many conflicts around the world are attributed to a lack of self-determination. The increase in the number of intrastate conflicts during recent decades has been dramatic, especially in considering the relative decline in the number of interstate conflicts. Intense, often violent, inter-ethnic conflict has been accompanied by the struggle between different forces to maintain and break up multi nation states.

## **Peace and Social Justice: A Prerequisite for Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development is a multi-faceted concept. It does not only aim at amplifying incomes but bring about 'structural changes and social transformation'. The World Conference on Development in Budapest in 1976 reiterated to create a platform for developing an interrelation between peace and development in contemporary political situations. The agenda of the Conference included developing nations and the various challenges posed by colonialism and to struggle for a new system of international economic relations. It also deliberated and included the different ways and means of achieving development. The International Working Group stresses the qualitative aspect of development in assessing performance and setting development goals.

Sustainability of civilizations and their culture is something that will determine the pace and direction of development and survival of the world. Development is seen as a 'struggle against colonialism, neo-colonialism and economic imperialism'. There is an innate association between peace and social justice, and development. Peace is a condition on which development achieved so far can be sustained and future development planned. The Budapest conference asserted that colonialism is the historic base of the unequal development and underdevelopment. Neo-colonialism tends to create a world of exploitation. The historic injustices done during colonialism have transcended into contemporary world and are responsible for the current unequal distribution of wealth and development. The economic expansion that the world is witnessing poses an ominous threat to the world peace and order. The developing world is at the brink of collapse as the imperialistic war mongering is knocking down country after country.

Development and its sustainability depend heavily on peace and social justice. The report of the United Nations

Secretary General on the 'Prevention of Armed Conflict' states that prevention of armed conflicts and sustainable developments are mutually reinforcing concepts. Armed conflicts are to be averted to help the process of development sustain. This can be achieved by eliminating the causes of conflicts, most of which lie within the economic and political system. The social discrimination that some groups experience and prejudices they face in resource allocation tends to keep them away from their share of development. This generates resentment and eventually leads to conflicts.

Inclusive economic growth is the keystone to sustainable development. The states that are witnessing intra-state conflicts may not want to include the warring groups in the process of development as it would make them stronger and difficult to contain but if a comprehensive model of development is not followed the basic causes of conflicts like discrimination and poverty cannot be contained.

The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) co-organized a panel on the relationship between peace and sustainable development with the Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the UN And Peace Islands Institute on February 7, 2014 at the United Nations (UN). The panel lists discussed how peace is essential for sustainable development and how economic, social and environmental development is necessary for durable peace. Because these two concepts are interconnected, UN agencies and member states need to closely work on both concepts simultaneously and discuss how international or regional organizations can enforce peace agreements which are the first step in implementing policies to achieve sustainable development goals.

The interconnectedness between sustainable development and peace is established beyond doubt but peace has to be seen in the light of sustainable peace which is not only marked by the absence of war but is about the absence of violence generally. It demands a zero tolerance to violence in households and in communities, within countries and across States. Sustainable peace entails equal participation of all citizens in the public life of their country and community. Equal representation leads to more participatory and representative political decisions. In turn, this results in a more harmonious society and provides a strong foundation for the development of sustainable peace. Social justice and social cohesion is critical to sustainable peace which also depends on equal rights, equal opportunity and the equal participation of

all. Sustainable development is not merely limited to maintenance of resource flow; it requires some sort of social organisation in place that helps in building social consensus and peace and reaches an agreement about collective interests while ignoring their individual ones.

Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler explain the relationship between conflict and natural resources in terms of a single cause. They forward the greed versus grievance theory of correlation of conflict and resource wealth and premised the idea that countries whose wealth is dependent on export of primary commodities are vulnerable to conflict. They argue that greed is a strong motivating factor behind violence and it is this greed of rebel groups that finds a correlation with their trade of natural resources (2000).

Scholars tend to refute the above theory and call for a more reflective analysis of the 'nature of state, state-society relation, and structural inequalities' as the factors responsible for producing conflict. Macartan Humphreys challenges the rebel-greed hypothesis and argues that conflicts emerge when a state is unable to further strong state-society relations. He associates greed with the dependence on natural resources. Many conflicts are financed by natural resources whilst others reasons are also present. The world is witnessing wars being waged against states to extract their natural resources without allowing any share to the indigenous populations.

## **Social Work Commitment to Sustainable Development**

Professional social work has come a long way from its modest beginnings in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as charity organisers to possessing specialized knowledge of handling different human and social problems today. This profession is based on the ideologies and philosophy of humanitarianism, democracy, liberalism and rationalism and it is these ideologies that define its role not only as service provider but also of conscious keeper. The complex and pluralistic societies that exist today have created new demands on the social work profession. It is required to play the role of logical connection between particular social functions and appropriate social institutions. The main aim is to promote human welfare by preventing sufferings and providing relief to those in distress (Butrym, 1976).

Social work profession has a dual focus on the individual well-being and with the conditions that would promote

and enhance it. This concern with the individual and the environment stipulates a balanced approach between the remedy to the problems and the fight against the circumstances responsible for creating them. Earlier social work profession was criticized for being unable to fulfil the ever-increasing demands of services to society but the powers of this profession have widened over a period of time. The focus has now shifted to social action from curative, correctional, rehabilitative, preventive and developmental services.

Katherine Kendall (2000) notes that social work, more than any other profession is deeply rooted in the beliefs and social climate of the times in which it is practised. The world is currently going through an age of wars fought at the doorstep of civilian population and using sophisticated warfare techniques. Different social work perspectives have emerged that can provide a framework for solutions to the conflicts and conflict created problems so that an enduring peace is established and sustainable development ensured.

Radical social work practice begins with the fundamental premise that circumstances of people at risk can be traced to economic and political relationships that exist in the larger social order<sup>1</sup>. Psychological, economic or social deprivations of the individual are viewed as the most concrete expression of the inequitable distribution of power, resources and political status in the larger political economy. The radical practitioners developed political and organizational skills for the purpose of mobilizing and effectively utilizing large numbers of people to confront the centres of concentrated power and resources that affect client's daily lives. Radical social workers rely on political and organizational skills as opposed to technical and focused definitions of knowledge to address and resolve problems. They define the arena for struggle as outside the social service bureaucracy and the community. Radical social workers are involved with various movements to support their various activities for social change. Their primary activities include development of unions, discussion groups and practice groups. They create alliances with client groups for the purpose of rolling back the controlling apparatus of welfare state to strengthen the low income communities and increase capacity to advance a programme for them believing in welfare state expansion (Galper, 1972).

Radical social workers uncover social issues that are hidden including hunger, abused women, homelessness

etc. They consistently focus on the social dynamics that create the problem and insist that this larger context be part of a treatment solution that will not only remove the cause of the problem but also help to deal with them and place clients in a better position to cope. The attention of radical practice has recently also been on alternative delivery system and new practice methods. They concentrate on many clinical issues as a vehicle for creative practice innovation and as a legitimate element in broad strategies for change.

Structural social work is based on socialist ideology and radical social work perspective. Both regard inequality as a structural part of capitalism falling along lines of race, gender age etc. This inequality excludes these groups from opportunities and meaningful participation in society. Structural social workers seek to change the social system. They try to transform the conditions and social structure that cause these negative effects. This involves providing immediate relief on one level accompanied by long term institutional and structural change. The foundation of society consists of a dominant ideology, which is transmitted to all members of society through the process of socialization and determines the nature of a society's institutions and the relations among its people (Mullaly, 1997).

Feminist social work practice is a radical alternative to traditional social work even though they share theoretical similarity. Both approaches express a fundamental concern to the individual's relationship within the community, individual and socially defined needs, and human dignity and rights of self-determination. Feminist social work practice stresses challenging existing conditions rather than adjusting to them. This approach actively commits to making alterations in the relationships, processes, and institutions.

Social workers have always advocated a just and peaceful world. Social justice is central to the profession's values as enunciated in NASW Code of Ethics. They are expected to promote the policies that safeguard rights of all and uphold equity and social justice. The profession can strive towards realizing the goal of security and peace by actively getting involved at macro level. Social workers can assume the roles of social activists and advocate for policy formulations based on equitable distribution of resources effectively ending the economic discrimination and social alienation of groups. There is also a need for thorough research by workers so that the latent discontent

in communities or groups is located before it boils into controversies. This disgruntlement of certain groups can be contained by planning programmes and projects of economic and social transformation and involving people's participation. Tocqueville argues that engagement of the community is the focal point of democracy but civic engagement and participation are decreasing, seriously jeopardising it. Community organisation is one method of social work that becomes prominent here as the entire method is based on locating the community needs and attempting to solve them by helping communities get organised. Social work professionals have to ensure that civilian capacity has specialized skills to rebuild state institutions in a way that makes them more accessible to all the groups of populations and less prone to discrimination. Community Organisation is a framework and methodology used by Social Workers in empowering people's organisations as a way of addressing poverty and social inequality, an approach that transforms powerless and voiceless poor into a dynamic, participatory and politically responsive community.

A common factor of many political conflicts is the states failing increasing the state of chaos and confusion. These processes of institutional change have been described in the literature as forms of 'state collapses' (Milliken, 2003; Zartman, 1995) or "state failure (Ghani and Lockhart, 2009). However, despite the absence or failure of the state apparatus, governance structures emerge amidst violent conflict when different actors replace weak or inexistent state institutions that may well have been absent at the start of the conflict. In some cases, these actors are outsiders to the communities they (intend to) control, while in other cases they may be part of local communities and leadership structures or be related to community members via kinship, ethnic or other ties (Justino, 2012). Social workers can apply their organising skills in building or rebuilding civil societies. They can aim at developing what Putnam calls 'Bonding' and 'Bridging' between members of community.

The profession needs to have a dual focus on protection and promotion of rights to security and justice in the context of the rule of law - before, during and after conflicts. Peace, stability, human rights and effective governance based on the rule of law are important conduits for sustainable development. We are living in a world that is increasingly divided. Some regions enjoy sustained levels of peace, security and prosperity while others fall into seemingly

endless cycles of conflict and violence. This is by no means inevitable and must be addressed.

High levels of armed violence and insecurity have a destructive impact on a country's development, affecting economic growth and often resulting in long standing grievances among communities that can last for generations. Sexual violence, crime, exploitation and torture are also prevalent where there is conflict or no rule of law, and social workers must advocate measures to protect those who are most at risk. Refugee crisis is engulfing half of the world and there is no solution emerging. They are in dire need of social work services like facilitating their entry to safer areas, providing food, shelter, healthcare and education. Their experiences are traumatic, so are of those who are unable to flee, necessitating the need for counselling.

The concepts of peace, social justice, development and security are a 'web of interwoven relationships and processes'. Galtung argues that peace is not only non-violence against each other but against environment also which is constantly being exploited for and by human activities. The existing model of economic growth is also based on environmental exploitation resulting in scarcity of natural resources. This gives rise to forces of livelihood insecurity and sows the seeds for conflict. In view of this, emanated the concept of sustainable development, which talks about a change in the exploitation of resources and guarantees the survival of human race. It embraces a change in the fundamental attitudes to life and work in social, cultural and political institutions.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to significantly reduce all forms of violence, and work with governments and communities to find lasting solutions to conflict and insecurity. Social workers can endeavour to strengthen the rule of law and promoting human rights as also in reducing the flow of illicit arms and strengthening the participation of all in the institutions of global governance.

In post-conflict situations social work professionals have an active pledge to peace building. They have to ensure equal participation of all in economic recovery and social reconstruction and representation in governance to all groups. They have a commitment to ensuring enhancement of capacities of all and empowerment of victims of conflicts.

## Conclusion

Development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process that aims at the constant improvement in the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals. Development is critical to eliminating direct violence and establishing peace which in turn is a pre-condition for development. It is meant to raise the living standards of people, promotion of welfare and ensures the basic conditions of peace. This is the beginning of viewing development as a human right. Social work profession has a significant role to play in trying to create conditions for peace so that development becomes sustainable.

## References

- Bahera, N. C. (2006.). *Gender, conflict and migration*. New Delhi. Sage Publications.
- Butrym, Z. (1976). *The nature of social work*. The University of Michigan. Macmillan Press.
- Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2000). Greed and grievance in civil war. *Oxford economic papers*, 56(4), 563-595.
- De la Costa, H. (1970). *The Phillipino and the Challenge to Development*. In Keynote address delivered at Seminar on Socio-economic Perspectives. Davos City. September 2, 1970.
- Galper, J. (1980). *Social work practice: A radical perspective*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs.
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace and peace research. *The Journal of Peace Research*, 6, 167-191.
- Ghani, A., & Lockhart, C. (2009). *Fixing failed states: A Framework for rebuilding a fractured world*. Oxford University Press.
- Justino, P. (2012). Violent Conflict and Human Capital Formation. In G.K. Brown and A. Langer (eds) *Elgar handbook of civil war and fragile states*. Cheltenham. Edward Elgar. 187-200.
- Mullaly, R. P. (1997). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory and practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Nandy, A. (1989). Development and Third World Cultures. In John S. Augustine (Ed.) *Strategies for Third World Development*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Humphreys, M. (2005). Natural resources, conflict, and conflict resolution: Uncovering the mechanisms. *Journal of conflict resolution*, 49(4), 508-537.
- Kendall, K. (2015). Social work education: Its origins in Europe. *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 2(28).

- Pearce, D., Markandya, A., & Barbier, E. (1989). *Blueprint for a green economy*. Earthscan Publications. London, UK.
- Milliken, J. (2003). *State failure, collapse and reconstruction*. Wiley.
- Prasad, R. (1998). Socio-Economic Development: Some Sociological Issues. In S.P. Srivastava (Ed.), *The development debate: Critical perspectives*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Srivastava, S. P. (1996). Sustainable Development: Issues and Considerations. In K. Gopal Iyer (Ed.), *Sustainable Development: Ecological and Socio-cultural Dimensions*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing
- Sharma, S. L. (1996). Sustainable Development: Socio-cultural Imperatives. In K. Gopal Iyer (Ed.), *Sustainable Development: Ecological and Socio-cultural Dimensions*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing
- Report of Commission 11. (1976, October, 8-11). *World Conference of Development*. Budapest.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our Common Future*.
- Zartman, W. I. (1995). *Collapsed states: The disintegration and restoration of legitimate authority*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Encyclopaedia of Social Work (18<sup>th</sup> Edition)