

Book Review

Jeffrey D. Sachs (2015). *The Age of Sustainable Development* (Foreword by Ban Ki-moon). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Chul-Kyoo Kim*

Professor, Department of Sociology, Korea University

Some issues become important social agenda through the process of social construction. Public awareness and policy intervention are possible only when an issue is well delivered to the citizens through communication networks. Media and media-related actors play a very important role in the public debate or specific agenda building. The current pandemic raises many social and policy issues that the media must cover. These issues include inequality, poverty, and ecological debates that are deeply embedded in the COVID-19 as a social problem.

Globally, we are all living through the COVID-19 era today. While many of us are suffering from fear, concern, loneliness, and frustration, this is the perfect time to think about where we are as human race. The pandemic provides us with an opportunity to be humble and ponder upon some fundamental questions about our civilization and ‘development.’

There is an imminent challenge of global environmental change which is related with the recurrent rise of virus-related

*ckkim@korea.ac.kr

epidemic cases. Climate change and global warming are the results of human activities over the past couple hundred years. So called development, which is commonly measured in terms of money such as Gross Domestic Production, has depended on the intensive use of fossil fuel. This led to unprecedented economic growth at the expense of irreversible environmental degradation at a global scale. The development fever led to intensive exploitation of natural resources and nature itself. In the process, socially disadvantaged population, especially in the Third World region, has suffered the most. This involves the issue of justice. While it was the people in the North who enjoyed the affluence, people in the South are often blamed today for their use of traditional energy.

The Age of Sustainable Development (TASD) by Jeffery Sachs, a well-known economist at Columbia University, was written in 2015. But I believe its value and profound implications are more evident today as we are holed up at home in the corona era. The book consists of 14 chapters and deals with a wide range of issues such as climate change, poverty, social inclusion, health, food security, resilient cities, and biodiversity.

The book starts with the concept of sustainable development and concludes with specific sustainable development goals (SDGs). As the author introduces, TASD was written as a part of global massive open online course (MOOC) and the book is easy to follow. The public in general will have little difficulty understanding diverse issues related to sustainable development. Yet, this does not mean that what Sachs is saying in the book is simple and superficial. The way the author presents the issues are sometimes provoking and challenging. In this sense, TASD is an excellent reader for both undergraduate and graduate students who are interested in understanding global issues that are closely connected. TASD is an essential reader for both social and natural

scientists who have been so immersed into their own specialized research. This means that the challenge of sustainable development and achieving the SDGs require the collaboration and co-work among all academia, not to mention participation by the government and its citizens.

The term, sustainable development, was introduced in a publication titled "*World Conservation Strategy: Living Resources Conservation for Sustainable Development*," the goal of which was to "help advance the achievement of sustainable development through the conservation of living resources" (IUCN, 1980, p. iv). Then, it was in 1987 that sustainable development became well-known to the public as it emphasized the intergenerational aspect of development. In the Brundtland Commission, sustainable development was defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p. 41).

We hear a lot about the sustainable development. However, the way Sachs presents the concept is worth a closer look. He emphasizes in the Preface that "sustainable development is both a way of looking at the world, with a focus on the interlinkages of economic, social, and environmental change, and a way of describing our shared aspirations for a decent life, combining economic development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability" (xiii). This conceptualization is the reflection of Sachs' dual roles as a well-established academia and policy advisor to the United Nations secretary-general on the Millennium Development Goals.

Global climate change is threatening the very basis of human civilization and eco-systems. It is becoming increasingly clear that this crisis is the result of human activities. The economic development is responsible for the environmental degradation.

The term Anthropocene has now become widely accepted as the current Earth's changes in climate and biodiversity are mainly driven by industrial activities. This process involved power relations and inequality among diverse actors.

Sachs evaluates the economic development at a global level over time and concludes that we are living in world of plenty. Yet what is striking is that there are still many people who suffer from "extreme poverty," which means that these people cannot meet their basic needs. The number of people who are under extreme poverty is estimated at 1 billion to 2.5 billion (p. 30). The poverty is geographically uneven and that is why the author emphasizes "geographical reasoning."

To this geographical perception, Sachs adds environmental perspective in rethinking development to construct the concept of sustainable development. Sachs cites research done by scientists to make the point. For example, CO₂, which is a major greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, has been stable during the past 800,000 years. It is only "in the last blink of an eye in geographical time, really in the past 150 years" that the "concentration of CO₂ has shot up like a vertical rocket" (pp. 40-41). And this is mainly caused by human activities of burning fossil fuels.

According to Sachs, three pillars of sustainable development are the following: economic development, broad-based social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. In addition, good governance is critical for these pillars to be well-supported to achieve sustainable development. After careful review of issues related to economic development, poverty, and environment in the first chapter, Sachs deals with specific issues in the following chapters.

In chapter 5, the author provides his diagnosis of extreme poverty in underdeveloped countries. Main reasons for poverty

can be diverse ranging from poverty trap to bad economic policies as well as culture to geopolitics. Hence, accurate diagnosis is important before prescribing adequate medicine. Sachs states that “Africa needed its own diagnosis and prescription, not one repeated by rote from another part of the world, much less from Washington, D. C.” (p. 107). Unlike many neo-classical economists who prescribe universal market solution as a panacea, Sachs is much cautious and emphasizes tailored approach. In addition, he acknowledges the importance of government and good governance. In his own words, “Governance is so important because the role of government in economic development is absolutely crucial” (p. 129).

I believe Sachs’ emphasis on the importance of government role has been proved correct during this pandemic era. Simply put, government is very important. Differential approaches by the government to COVID-19 led to very different results in terms of human casualties and economic performances. What we observe in countries like the United States, which is currently suffering the most, demonstrates the importance of government as a key actor for providing public service.

This leads us to the issue of health. Health is a public issue while it is observed at an individual level. Sachs states that “(g)ood health is at the center of wellbeing and is vital for everything else we hold dear” (p. 275). In general, economic development leads to progress in health. But there is an important twist. There are more vulnerable group of people, i.e., the poor. The poor are the ones who suffer from serious health problems such as AIDS and malaria. In this respect, Sachs emphasizes the importance of efficient investment considering the limited budget. He argues that “modest but targeted investments in public health for poor people can make a profound difference for their health outcomes” (p. 281). While

this book is focusing on the less developed countries, Sachs' observation can be applied to some developed countries where inequality is a major problem. Social minorities have been most severely affected by the COVID-19 even in developed countries. The pandemic has taught us an important lesson that health issue is directly related to inequality and poverty.

In this sense, the issue of social inclusion as an important pillar of sustainable development is relevant. The goal of social inclusion is to eliminate discrimination, guaranteeing equal right under the laws, providing basic needs to everyone, and ensuring social mobility (p. 232). The author has a detailed discussion of inequality based on race, economic resources, and gender. I believe that social inclusion has become an increasingly more important value as human beings today encounter the pandemic, which affects social groups quite unequally and unevenly.

Another important topic that Sachs deals with at length is food security. In his own words, "(o)ne of the most complicated unsolved problems of sustainable development is how the world will feed itself" (p. 315). It is observed that about 40 percent of the global population is malnourished. Food insecurity is highly related to "climate shocks and other environmental ills" (p. 324). In chapter 10, Sachs examines the issue of food security in detail and provides an excellent analysis of food security and environmental change. The basic food needed for human sustainability is still the grain, and the provision of grain faces challenges from both socio-economic and environmental changes.

On one hand, people are eating more meat than ever before. Livestock animals eat significant portion of grain, too. Using grain to feed animals means the decrease of grain for human food. While the global middle class are enjoying meat produced by concentrated feeding operation, the poor suffer from hunger and malnourishment. On the other hand, global warming is an

accumulated and unintended consequences of industrialization of the West. It is harmful for grain production, especially in the poorest tropical parts of the world. Sachs observes that “today’s dry places in the tropics and subtropics will tend to get drier” (p. 335). This will make the food insecurity in the Third World even worse.

Since the 20th century, farming has become highly industrialized, which means that agricultural production needs fossil fuel, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. Under the name of Green Revolution, industrial farming has become globalized. In addition, rapid increase of meat consumption concomitantly led to the development of factory farming. These changes are major factors for production of greenhouse gases such as CO₂, N₂O, and methane which exacerbates climate changes.

To solve these problems related to ‘unsustainable’ food production, Sachs prescribes higher productivity based on another Green Revolution and making crop varieties more nutritious by using modern science and GMO technology. I find these prescriptions uncomfortable. The current food problem of poor countries has been the result of political instability and unstable distribution system. Food shortage could possibly result from unbalanced flow in the trade of agricultural products. Political reforms and domestic agricultural development which emphasizes local farm knowledge and indigenous seeds are more important. Peasants in the Third World should be encouraged to produce their own food rather than producing cash crops for international market. The pandemic has taught us about the vulnerability of global agriculture based on free trade. Food should be produced in the local area and food sovereignty should be respected.

Chapters 12 and 13 deal with environmental issues such as climate change and biodiversity. T ASD provides affluent and

persuasive data on the solutions. The way the issues are presented is reader friendly with colorful maps and graphs on what has been environmentally occurring on earth. Sachs emphasizes the urgency to decrease CO₂ emission levels from fossil fuels globally. Currently, China and the United States are the two main emitters of CO₂ and thus, they should be the main actors to create change. The author concludes the chapter on climate change by stating that “the world has climate solution. What it lacks is the time for further delay” (p. 445). I cannot agree more.

The concluding chapter introduces the processes and programs of SDGs. SDGs are built upon the Millennium Development Goals which were adopted in the year 2000. SDGs are more encompassing and emphasize universal collaboration by government, businesses, scientists, and NGOs. Sachs, in response to a request by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, created Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN). SDSN has prepared ten SDGs to the UN, which has developed into 17 SDGs goals later. Today, many countries are attempting to institutionalize SDGs in each governmental structure. For instance, there is the Committee on Sustainable Development and Korean Sustainable Development Goals (K-SDGs) in Korea. Yet, what the committee has achieved and the contents of the K-SDGs are not very well known to the citizens as of yet.

I think this is where the media and actors in communication industry should play a more active role. The media should inform the important implications of sustainable development to the public. Experts in the communication studies should raise the issues from TAsD more aggressively so that the governments can be more active in pursuing the SDGs. The efforts to achieve SDGs are important for building healthy fundamentals against pandemics. The impacts of COVID-19 are unevenly distributed

globally reflecting different economic states, government roles, and degree of inequality of each country. It is the responsibility of the media and media-related actors to bring forth these social and policy aspects of pandemic. In the long run, sustainable development is the social vaccine for resilience against the epidemics. Hence, the implications of T ASD are immense and the challenges Sachs presents are urgent.

More citizens, journalists, and communication scholars should read Sachs' work and arguments reviewed here and participate in the collective task of making our world more sustainable.

References

- Brundtland, G. H., & World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our common future*. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- IUCN. (Ed.). (1980). *World conservation strategy: Living resources for sustainable development*. Retrieved from IUCN website: <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/mml/iucn-ed-world-conservation-strategy-living-resource-conservation-sustainable-development>

Submission: December 06, 2020

Review: December 14, 2020

Decision of publication: December 21, 2020