# INTERNATIONAL COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

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## Summary

This article explores how international news media frame information about sustainable development. Although sustainable development has emerged as one of the central themes in current approaches to development, it has been interpreted and implemented by agencies, institutions, nations, and communities in different ways. This analysis begins by elucidating the production and dissemination of knowledge about development through discourses which represent ideas and practices that are conceived by, reflect, and legitimize the power of key development agencies and institutions. Media also play an important role in constructing development discourse, by identifying agendas and issues and framing events for readers.

Focusing on the publication of Our Common Future in 1987, the 1992 Earth Summit, and the 1997 Earth Summit Plus Five conference, we analyze news reports over time and across two international wire services. In this analysis, we explore how sustainable development is defined, how problems and solutions are framed, and which sources are

used in this discourse. Overall, news media highlight the integration of environmental and economic issues, along with the need for cooperation between nations and institutions. Other aspects that characterize sustainable development as an alternative global strategy for development, such as social factors and the involvement of popular sectors and local communities, are not prevalent in this discourse.

## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development may refer to a holistic integration of social, cultural, political, and economic concerns, or highlight the integration of economic and environmental concerns. A key condition for this development approach is that we attempt to safeguard the ability of future generations to meet their needs, and not just concern ourselves with short-term goals. As an alternative global strategy for development, this concept's popularity has grown significantly in the last 20 years. Many development agencies have attempted to engage in sustainable development, but with quite different interpretations of this concept.

In this research, we focus on how international news media have covered sustainable development issues. Our analysis compares the construction of this discourse by two competing wire services, Associated Press (AP) and Inter-Press service (IPS). While Associated Press, a US-based news agency, aims to gather news in a timely, expedient and objective manner, Inter-Press Service intends to recognize voices and events from regions of the world that tend to be overlooked in mainstream media. Thus, this examination seeks to identify variation across these two sources that might correspond to their structural and ideological differences.

This analysis is also longitudinal, examining coverage of sustainable development over a ten-year period, focusing on three significant events: the publication of Our Common Future by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987; the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; and the follow-up conference titled "Earth Summit Plus Five," held in 1997.

Using a sample of approximately 150 news articles produced by these two agencies during this time period, we consider how these news sources have framed and interpreted the concept of sustainable development; what they have identified as the most relevant issues and themes within sustainable development; what groups or individuals have been designated as responsible for the problems and solutions; and what groups or individuals have been able to articulate their interpretation of sustainable development in mediated discourse. This analysis should provide important information toward our understanding of how the concept of sustainable development has been understood by the news media, and thus articulated for public discourse.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Background

### 2.1. Understanding Development Discourse

Assessing how international channels of communication might contribute to achieving sustainable development demands careful attention to the ways that the term is framed

and disseminated through discourse. We conceptualize discourse here as systems of knowledge and practice that emerge in statements and actions that comprise and reproduce particular perspectives. For example, development functions as an institutional discourse through which knowledge about the world system, its problems and resolutions, is articulated and reinforced.

Much attention has been given recently to how hegemonic views are expressed and mobilized by development institutions and practitioners in the process of generating strategic interventions designed to effect social change. Hegemonic views represent the most powerful agencies dominating development processes. Analysis of development discourse reveals how development problems and solutions are socially constructed through the use of ideas, images, and practices. As these systems of thought and action are articulated and enacted, they lend legitimacy to development approaches that emanate from powerful national and international institutions.

Development discourse reflects the economic, social, political, and cultural stances taken by these institutions, and legitimizes their practices. While these institutions control the material resources that comprise foreign aid or development support, they also control the means to determine how we understand the processes and accomplishments of development. By addressing certain social groups as "recipients" or "beneficiaries" of foreign aid, for example, we see the social construction of the situation of need, and an asymmetrical relationship in which powerful first world institutions attempt to solve the problems of underdevelopment by allocating resources and devising strategies. The designation of nations or regions as "first" or "third" world itself reinforces power by portraying certain parts of the world as needy or problematic. Concurrently, the melding of such patterns of thought and action is inscribed in texts such as development agency reports, international agreements, and academic publications. The circulation of such texts, and the reproduction of their vocabularies, formats, and themes, legitimize their ideological approaches.

This chapter explores international news media as other textual sources contributing to the interpretations and applications of sustainable development in the global context. Media have played a key role in raising public awareness of global efforts to alleviate poverty, reverse environmental degradation, and instill social change in many parts of the world. It is crucial, therefore, to determine how media texts construct sustainable development.

## 2.2. The Dominant Discourse of Development

The historical trajectory of the field of development has followed global economic trends, articulating modernization and growth, largely within the framework of advanced capitalism, as the dominant paradigm of development. However, recently we have seen the emergence and recognition of alternative discourses that demonstrate resistance to this dynamic, as in the case of new social movements representing the voices and practices of marginalized sectors such as women, youth, indigenous peoples, grassroots organizations, and others aiming to stem environmental degradation.

Sustainable development in many ways represents a significant departure from the

economically-driven paradigm of modernization and growth. Although definitions and interpretations vary, sustainable development became widely known as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," with the publication of Our Common Future, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. In contrast to the discourse of modernization, sustainable development reflects concerns prevalent in the late twentieth century about the viability of the social, economic, and environmental contexts within which development projects are implemented. It privileges the integration of economic and environmental concerns, while underscoring the need to project beyond the immediate future when determining development goals and strategies.

The emergence of sustainable development as a key theme in understanding current approaches to development can be located within a more general critical response to the narrowly conceived and largely economic framework provided by modernization. Early models of development posited modernization as a linear, universal process in which individuals and societies would progress, shedding traditional beliefs, static roles, and hierarchical political formations. Post-Enlightenment thought emphasized scientific rationality, pluralist democracy, and free market economics, providing the context for modernization and the framework for approaches to development policies throughout much of the latter twentieth century.

Modernization designated the individual as the primary agent of social change, claiming that all men and women could become more advanced and modern by adopting innovative techniques and technologies and by embracing the political, socio-cultural, and economic models that guided developed nations. Thus, early development approaches targeted the individual, utilizing technologies such as the mass media to transmit information designed to instill necessary attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs. If conventional models of development problematized poverty in specifically economic terms, then solutions were primarily concerned with ways to increase economic activity, enhance productive capacities, and enable participation in existing global economic systems.

Far beyond the need to fulfill basic human needs such as food and shelter, the discourse of modernization projected a much more sophisticated role for its subject, envisioning leisure time and the pursuit of intellectual, economic, and political projects, all of which were predicated on the need to remove or overcome natural barriers to progress and growth. Thus, the environment was seen to work either in service of, or against, progress, but was seldom identified as a key theme in the drive to develop. The concept that men and women could work in harmony with the environment in pursuit of a more balanced and equitable kind of growth was considered an alternative perspective. Advocates of such positions, such as the green movements of the 1960s and 1970s, were, for many years, relegated to the margins of development discourse.

Attention to the problematic aspects of the dominant model of development became widespread in the 1970s and 1980s. A body of work produced by Latin American analysts identified dependency as the predominant characteristic of the global economy. They suggested that models of national development advocated by international

agencies and institutions failed to account for the increasingly widespread situations of dependency in which wealthy nations were able to benefit from the poverty in poor nations. Furthermore, modernization-based models, with their emphasis on material growth and foreign trade, were accused of fostering internal struggles within nations as the poorest and most marginalized sectors seldom benefited from development interventions. The tradition of cultural imperialism provided theoretical and empirical frameworks for understanding the cultural and social implications of economic dependency in media and other sectors. Finally, development researchers from within third world nations themselves challenged the very foundation of modernization-based models, particularly the concept that all nations would necessarily follow the same path to development or be concerned with purely economic objectives.

Several key developments in both the theory and practice of development set the stage for the emergence of discourses enfolding equity, participation, and sustainability. Critical re-evaluation of the key assumptions and strategies associated with modernization underscored the need to involve local people in defining and implementing social change processes. As this perspective gained prominence in development discourse, a growing number of voices began to question the impacts on the environment brought about by an unfailing faith in science and technology as the means to stimulate modernity.

To move these concerns into mainstream discourse required the concerted international effort of key institutions such as the United Nations, national governments, academics, and the international media. Though it is widely acknowledged that the concept of sustainability is not new, it did not acquire global recognition until relatively recently. The 1987 release of Our Common Future and the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, popularly known as the Earth Summit, are considered watershed events in shifting the general tenor of development discourse. Extensive participation of governments, international agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the news media during the Earth Summit, as well as other key international meetings held subsequently to address significant topics raised during the Rio discussions, significantly raised public awareness of global debates over environmental and economic development.

These events, and the guiding role taken by key institutions such as the United Nations, national governments, and prominent international NGOs such as Greenpeace, have been pivotal in two ways. First, they have linked institutional discourse of economic development with concerns for the environment in the public sphere. Second, sustainable development, by its very nature, provided an appropriate context for key institutions to implement changes in the systems of thought and practice that comprise development discourse in general.

## 2.3. The Discourse of Sustainable Development

Our Common Future differentiates sustainability from the discourse of modernization in several important ways. It suggests a more holistic understanding of development, intertwining two key conditions: first, prioritizing the basic needs of the world's poorest people; and second, understanding that economic and technological development

patterns prevalent in some parts of the world have imposed limitations on the earth's capacity to meet those needs. Furthermore, sustainable development discourse addresses issues of equity and participation by dismantling a rich-poor dichotomy that had buttressed traditional approaches to development. Casting development problems, rather than solutions, as universal, the discourse of sustainability legitimately recognizes that developed and developing nations share common goals and interests associated with protection and preservation of the natural environment. Observers have noted that, in theoretical and rhetorical terms at least, sustainability re-casts the players in the development arena. Poor nations are no longer needy recipients of benevolent aid provided by wealthier nations and institutions. Instead, the premises upon which sustainability are constructed demand that all nations and social actors work in cooperative ways to define and address common goals.

Similarly, the discourse of sustainable development suggests a higher degree of cooperation in international social and political formations if it is to form a viable basis for policy. Our Common Future indicates the direction of this shift: "In essence, sustainable development is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations."

## 2.4. The Role of Media in Establishing Discourse

The evolution of theory and practice in development is revealed by examining the relationships between institutional discourse of development and how these forms of knowledge and action reflect and affect larger arenas such as the global political economy. In this context, we recognize a variety of ways that development frameworks are disseminated to the public realm: through development projects and programs, international conferences, academic publishing, university programs aimed at training development professionals, the popular literature of social movements, and news coverage. Legitimate development frames are established by grounding their discourse in institutional practices and public support. Communications processes and technologies contribute to this process in important ways. Media images of poverty in the third world, for example, legitimize national expenditures on foreign aid, while news coverage of natural disasters in poor nations justifies the need to allocate resources to other nations.

The role of communications media is felt to be increasingly important in the process of constructing public discourse around issues of global concern. The creation of media frames, through language and imagery, helps set the agenda for public concern and debate. The process of culturally positioning the environment, for example, as a crucial point in national and international level policy-making was facilitated by media attention to events like the Rio Earth Summit. The current discourse of globalization, furthermore, indicates a shift in the discursive constructs of issues like development and the environment. While poverty and the environmental crisis continue to deepen worldwide, the plenitude and accessibility of media images available through information technologies have also offered a more global view of these conditions. The news media also play a key role in providing access to various types of discourse not

routinely available to the general public, such as scientific data or details about policy-making taken at national and international levels.

News media may also confer status or cast doubt on social groups and institutions, their actions, and their discourses. They are used by groups to gain attention and legitimacy for specific causes, struggles, or issues. Social movements, for example, carry out directed efforts to bring about social change, by articulating discourse and stimulating action. These social groups also conceive strategic campaigns that aim to change discourse or call into question the validity of the agendas and actions of powerful institutions such as development agencies, national governments, and international organizations. Discourse analysis of news texts demonstrates that pressure groups, social movements, and NGOs compete with other similar groups, as well as more powerful institutions, for media endorsement of their perspectives.

Social movements and governments alike attempt to use the media as a political resource, shaping their messages to correspond with the conventions of the news media. The professional routines of journalists, news values such as objectivity and veracity, and the ways that news reports are structured affect the ways that events are chosen and covered in the media. But, beyond this, the media themselves are conditioned by specific institutional formations shaped by larger political, economic, and social frameworks. Issues and events that receive media attention are often defined according to agendas determined by established institutions and thus correspond to broader ideological frames. Coverage is gained by referring to issues, people, or institutions that resonate with dominant political, social, or economic views. Thus, groups may "frame" their perspectives by linking them to prominent people, dominant views, or well-known institutions. Similarly, journalists "frame" the coverage they produce by selecting issues based on their resonance with dominant ideologies.

Transnational news agencies are a major source of information for other media outlets, governments, private corporations, and international organizations and play an important role in establishing public discourse in the global context. These news sources select and cover news items, often occurring in areas that are not geographically or culturally proximate to their primary readership, therefore attaching legitimacy to issues and events that they feel have implications on a global scale. They comprise extensive international communication systems in which news reports are collected and distributed through processing centers to buyers throughout the world. News produced by these agencies is generally purchased or provided as a continuous service, and often serves as the primary source of information for small or poor nations that lack the resources to develop domestic news services. Further, as most major news agencies recoup the majority of their production costs in their own domestic markets, they are able to provide their services to less wealthy nations at drastically reduced prices. This has led to criticism concerning the imposition of culturally and politically inappropriate news frames and agendas from first world nations and regions on others.

In this chapter we explore how international news media frame sustainable development through their coverage of key international events since 1987. We contend that media act as one of the key institutions through which knowledge and activities surrounding sustainable development are filtered, represented, and disseminated. Given the central

role of international wire services in providing news reports, we consider these to be important agents in conferring legitimacy and attention on events and issues to a global audience. We consider the construction of discourse from the perspective of news texts themselves, examining the prevailing voices and perspectives on sustainable development.

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