

## Repositório ISCTE-IUL

---

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2022-05-13

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Medeiros, E. (2019). The age of sustainable development. *Journal of Geography*. 118 (1), 49-50

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1080/00221341.2018.1515240

Publisher's copyright statement:

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Medeiros, E. (2019). The age of sustainable development. *Journal of Geography*. 118 (1), 49-50, which has been published in final form at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00221341.2018.1515240>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Publisher's Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

---

### Use policy

Creative Commons CC BY 4.0

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a link is made to the metadata record in the Repository
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

---

The Age of Sustainable Development, by Jeffrey D. Sachs, Columbia University Press, 2015, 343 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-17314-5.

The work of Jeffrey Sachs on world development, global macroeconomics, and the fight against poverty is vast and, in our view, widely relevant for providing a global perspective of these processes. But more importantly, in our opinion, is his influential work in providing alternative visions to solving global environmental problems, by advocating the importance of sustainable development paths for policy implementation, namely within the United Nations, and as an advisor of several heads of state and governments across the world. Hence, and despite being three years old and widely reviewed upon publication, we consider that the content of the book embraces fundamental questions for the future of mankind, making it an important book that should be revisited. Moreover, this revised book is especially interesting and relevant since the concept of sustainable development is gaining worldwide acceptance, due to an overwhelming recognition of the impacts of human activities and rising population on global warming, environmental pollution, and natural resources degradation.

Sachs' claim that 'sustainable development is a central concept for our age' (p.1) and the 'most important challenge facing our generation' (p. 4). In this light, Sachs provides an insightful guide to the concept of sustainable development, both as an analytical and as a normative concept. From an analytical standpoint, he presents it as an interaction 'of three complex systems: the world economy, the global society, and the Earth's physical environment' (p. 3). From a normative outlook, he associates it with a 'set of goals to which the world should aspire' (p. 3).

Because the book is intended for a general audience, Sachs begins with a fundamental question: What is Sustainable Development? He argues that sustainable development 'is both a way of understanding the world and a method for solving global problems' (p.1). Sachs starts by associating sustainable development with the conceptual triad 'economy-society-environment', whilst invoking related components, such as economic growth, poverty and inequality, social networks and the physical environment. This reflects his will to place sustainable development as an encompassing and holistic concept, well above the concept of environmental development. Sachs concludes that 'to achieve the economic, social, and environmental objectives of the SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals - a fourth objective must also be achieved: good governance. According to Sachs, 'governments must carry out many core functions to enable societies to prosper' (p. 3).

Sachs systemic and four-pronged sustainable development concept is to be placed at the heart of policy development agendas and strategies. In this light, Sachs reinforces the importance of sustainable development approaches, are needed by major social actors such as governments and business, to tackle ‘four basic objectives of a good society: economic prosperity; social inclusion and cohesion; environmental sustainability; and good governance (p. 4). With this claim, Sachs presents a convincing case for a better understanding of sustainable development as ‘an ethical view of the world, a way to define the objectives of a well-functioning society, one that delivers wellbeing for its citizens today and for future generations’ (p. 11).

In a complementary way, Sachs associates the concept of sustainable development with the science of complex systems, by noting that it ‘involves not just one, but four complex interacting systems (p. 8): (i) global economy, (ii) social interactions, (iii) earth systems, and (iv) governance related issues. Taken all together, the author proposes the definition of sustainable development as ‘a way to understand the world as a complex interaction of economic, social, environmental and political systems’, as well as an ‘ethical view of the world, a way to define the objectives of a well-functioning society, one that delivers wellbeing for its citizens today and for future generations’. The following 13 chapters are then dedicated to analyse crucial components associated with the proposed four dimensions of the concept of sustainable development, in a worldly perspective. These include extreme poverty, social inclusion, education and health for all, food security, resilient cities, climate change, and biodiversity related issues.

On the whole, we consider this book as ‘must read’ for all citizens, as it successfully debates and summarises fundamental development issues of our age. However, in our opinion, in his quest to provide a more complete and holistic understanding of this concept, the author ends up with a definition which is far more appropriate for the concept of ‘territorial development’ or ‘spatial development’, in a more Anglo-Saxon term. More concretely, as sustainability constitutes the ecological dimension of territorialism, the discussion of concept of territorial development in this book could contribute to a better positioning and understanding of the concept of sustainable development within this academic debate. In this case, not as a twin concept, but as an ethical and normative approach to territorial development strategies.

More worrying still, from a geographer point of view, Sachs does not take into consideration a fundamental dimension of territorial development, with tremendous implications on sustainable development paths: ‘spatial planning’, as a way to increase territorial efficiency by, for instance,

promoting a more polycentric distribution of urban centres and inverting urban sprawl towards more compact cities. In turn, Sachs debates the importance of supporting the goals of promoting ‘resilient cities’, as a way to make them more sustainable, green, and resilient. Even so, the presented holistic approach to the concept of sustainable development makes this book appealing to a wide academic (from secondary through college) audience (economy, social sciences, physical sciences, etc.), and particularly interesting to geographic education. Here, the profusion of updated world maps with many key statistical indicators across all chapters, together with many other figures (charts, graphics, and photos), and a complete synthesis of themes debated in Geography (demographics, economic development, unequal world, social inclusion, etc.) makes this book a fundamental reading for geography students at all school levels.

To sum up, from a conceptual point of view, *The Age of Sustainable Development* offers an interesting, yet debatable, vision of the concept of sustainable development. Interesting, because it associates this concept with the concept of ‘complex systems’. Debatable, because, in our view, it does not clearly differentiate the concepts of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘territorial development’ and, at the same time, it does not elevate ‘spatial planning’ into a major pillar of sustainable development, despite mentioning the need to promoting resilient cities. Furthermore, as Kahn (2015) alludes, Sachs also seems to ignore more recent research in environmental economics and sustainable development in his analysis.

We realise that, in present times, territorial development, generically understood as a process aiming at improving economic competitiveness, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, sound territorial governance and spatial planning (Medeiros, 2017), requires a sustainable approach. Likewise, they also require an inclusive, long-term planned, integrated, and innovative approach. This means that, in our understanding, there is a need to draw a distinction between the concepts of sustainable development and territorial development. That does not mean that Sachs is incorrect in supporting the proposed holistic and systemic approach, as sustainable development does not encompass only environmental related aspects. Instead, we argue that the analytic components associated with the main dimensions of the sustainable development concept need to be limited to the ultimate goal associated with the concept of sustainability. This is more in line with 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’, as expressed by The World Commission on Environment and Development.

To conclude, Geography teachers have in this book a critical tool to transmit the importance and the advantages of promoting sustainable development strategies. At the same time, it can be used to introducing fundamental concepts of geographical analysis, such as ‘territorial development’ (see Medeiros 2017; Porter et al, 2008) and ‘territorial cohesion’ (see Faludi, 2010; Medeiros, 2016). For one, this debate could be instilled by comparing the Sachs perspective on what thinks is sustainable development, and existing literatures on the former mentioned concepts. Secondly, this comparison would likely allow for a better understanding of all these concepts, their crucial differences and their importance for ultimately improving the quality of life of citizens across the world. Finally, this conceptual debate ultimately intends to highlight the importance of a territorial/holistic and sustainable approach for policy implementation vis-à-vis mainstream ‘economic growth’ policy rationales.

#### References:

- Faludi, A. (ed.) 2010. “*Cohesion, Coherence, Cooperation: European Spatial Planning Coming of Age?*” Routledge, London
- Kahn, Matthew E. 2015. "A Review of The Age of Sustainable Development by Jeffrey Sachs†." *Journal Of Economic Literature* 53, no. 3: 654-666. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 22, 2018).
- Medeiros, E. 2016. “Territorial Cohesion: An EU Concept”, *European Journal of Spatial Development*, 60. Available from: <http://www.nordregio.org/publications/territorial-cohesion-an-eu-concept/>
- Medeiros, E. (ed) 2017. “*Uncovering the Territorial Dimension of European Union Cohesion Policy*”, Routledge, London.
- Potter R.; Binns, T.; Elliott, J.; Smith, D. 2008. “*Geographies of Development. An Introduction to Development Studies*”, Third Edition, Pearson Education Limited, Essex.

Reviewed by Eduardo Medeiros, DINÂMIA'CET-IUL, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Lisboa, Portugal