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# Rethinking sustainable development within the framework of poverty and urbanisation in developing countries



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### ABSTRACT

Since its emergence in the 1980s, the ideology underpinning sustainable development has become a metaphor for describing human welfare and environmental management. However, previous studies have overly focused on environmental aspects with little known about poverty–urbanisation implications on sustainable development. Given the magnitude of urbanisation and the pervasiveness of poverty in developing countries, this paper advocates for a poverty–urbanisation analytical approach to sustainable development in developing countries. First, the article provides an overview of sustainable development discourse. Second, the paper looks at the concepts of poverty and urbanisation and their ramifications on sustainable development. Third, examples of sustainable development policy initiatives and their associated poverty–urbanisation threats are presented. Fourth, the paper discusses the policy implications of these two phenomena on sustainable development. The paper concludes with some key issues necessary to make sustainable development a reality in developing countries.

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## 1. Introduction

Global acknowledgement of the need for environmental protection policies in development planning practices led to the emergence and promotion of sustainable development in the 1980s (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED, 1987](#)). Over the past three decades, the scope of sustainable development has been broadened to include public health, population growth and migration, and global poverty alleviation ([European Commission, 2005](#); [European Council, 2006](#)). Unfortunately, sustainable development research has increasingly focused on environmental conservation and natural resources management (e.g., [Baker, 2007](#); [European Commission, 1992](#); [Ogbodo, 2010](#); [Ziccai, 2012](#)) with limited consideration to poverty–urbanisation ramifications. This is notably the case for developing countries where these two phenomena are persistent and rife with debilitating impacts on ecological and environmental resources (see [Cohen, 2006](#); [Garland et al., 2007](#); United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division [UNDESA/PD, 2012](#)).

However, with increasing number of case studies from developing countries reporting on the failure of sustainable development to achieve the ideal synergies between environment, economy and society (e.g., [Carter and Howsam, 1999](#); [Eastwood and Lipton, 1999](#); [Ogbodo, 2010](#); United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP, 2011](#)), an understanding of poverty–urbanisation ramifications is relevant and urgent. According to the [United Nations \(2013\)](#), about 1.2 billion of the world's population mainly from the developing countries live below the poverty line (below US\$ 1.25 a day). For example, Africa has been identified as the only region where incidence of poverty has been increasing overtime, with the continent's share of global poverty expected to reach 82% in 2030 ([Alkire and Santos, 2011](#); [Chandy et al., 2013](#)). At the same time official United Nations statistics indicate that developing countries are expected to experience an unprecedented rate of urbanisation in the foreseeable future ([UNDESA/PD, 2012](#)) amidst persistent poverty conditions ([Cobbinah et al., 2013](#); [Garland et al., 2007](#); [United Nations, 2013](#)). For instance, the urban population of Africa, which was about 400 million in 2010, is projected to more than triple to about 1.3 billion in 2050 ([UNDESA/PD, 2012](#)). Research into poverty–urbanisation implications on sustainable is therefore tenable.

In a variety of contexts, it is true that several studies have focused on urbanisation (e.g., [UNDESA/PD, 2012](#)), poverty (e.g., [Chandy et al., 2013](#); [Cobbinah et al., 2013](#); [Garland et al., 2007](#); [United Nations, 2013](#)) and sustainable development (e.g., [Cobbinah et al., 2011](#); [Ogbodo, 2010](#); [Ziccai, 2012](#); [WCED, 1987](#)) especially in developing countries. Unfortunately, little is known about poverty–urbanisation implications on sustainable development in developing countries. It is therefore important to understand the ramifications of poverty and urbanisation in order to appreciate the kind of development outcomes being experienced in developing countries. This review advocates for a poverty–urbanisation analytical approach to sustainable development. Such analysis serves not only academic and scientific purposes but might be useful in planning and managing urban areas as well as safeguarding environmental and ecologically sensitive areas in developing countries. If such an understanding is observed and considered by national and local governments, NGOs and development partners, it can help rethink and reshape the strategies required to spur the realisation of sustainable development in developing countries.

This assessment consists of four parts. [Section 2](#) presents a background discourse on the concept of sustainable development. Although definitional discourse on sustainable development has been extensively researched (e.g., [Cobbinah et al., 2011](#); [Daly, 1996](#); [Kates et al., 2005](#); [Malcom, 1994](#); [WCED, 1987](#); [Ziccai, 2012](#)), it is important to provide the historical perspective in order to appreciate current thinking, and the place of poverty and urbanisation. [Section 3](#) analyses the concepts of poverty and urbanisation in developing countries and their ramifications on sustainable development. [Section 4](#) presents selected cases of sustainable development policy initiatives and their associated poverty–urbanisation threats, in an attempt to understand the limitations of sustainable development in developing countries. [Section 5](#) discusses the policy implications of these two phenomena on sustainable development. The article concludes with recommendations to promote the realisation of sustainable development.

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