

Sustainable Development – Utopia or Implementation Possibilities?

Zrównoważony rozwój – utopia czy możliwości realizacji?

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Abstract

The paper contains deliberations concerning the concept of sustainable development and utopia. The concept of utopia explains different perceptions of utopia, also from the historical point of view. Utopia usually brings negative associations because in the past it comprised unreal ideas presented in a simplified way and unattainable. Currently, the concept of utopia is presented as the necessity to introduce changes which have to be supported with action and cannot only be treated as dreams. You should be aware of opportunities and impossibilities of changing the reality when you do not agree with its functioning.

The second subchapter attempts to answer the question whether the sustainable development idea is a new utopia. The authors of the sustainable development idea do not present the vision of a better world which would replace the reality. They look for mechanisms which would allow their gradual implementation because it is not about a perfect world but about creating a holistic reality model. Therefore, the sustainable development idea means rather a plan of changes and not utopia.

The presented plans include the Earth Summit Resolutions and 27 rules of the *Rio Declaration* (1992). Their content is presented in the third subchapter of the article. Implementation of those resolutions and rules was assessed critically because it is suspected that they constitute a cover for the elites who desire power and that this is utopia used as a social manipulation tool.

Therefore, the sustainable development idea is supposed to be a model of reality, an announcement of performance of that model, or at least an attempt to take actions in order to achieve the planned development.

Key words: sustainable development, utopia, Earth Summit

Streszczenie

W artykule zawarte zostały rozważania dotyczące koncepcji zrównoważonego rozwoju i utopii. Koncepcja utopii wyjaśnia różne postrzeganie idei utopii, także historycznie. Najczęściej utopia wywołuje negatywne skojarzenia, gdyż historycznie były to nierealne idee, przedstawiane w uproszczeniu, bez możliwości realizacji. Obecnie ideę utopii przedstawia się jako konieczność zmian, które muszą być poparte działaniem, nie mogą być tylko marzeniami. Należy mieć świadomość możliwości i niemożności zmian rzeczywistości, gdy nie zgadzamy się z jej funkcjonowaniem.

Z kolei próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie czy nową utopią jest idea zrównoważonego rozwoju, jest drugi podrozdział. Twórcy idei zrównoważonego rozwoju nie przedstawiają idei wizji lepszego świata, który ma zastąpić rzeczywistość. Szukają mechanizmów, które pozwolą na ich stopniową realizację, gdyż nie chodzi o świat idealny, ale o stworzenie holistycznego modelu rzeczywistości. Dlatego idea zrównoważonego rozwoju jest raczej planem zmian, nie utopią.

Wśród różnych przedstawionych planów są Uchwały Szczytu Ziemi oraz 27 Zasad *Deklaracji z Rio* (z roku 1992). Ich treść przedstawiona została w trzecim podrozdziale artykułu. Realizacja tych uchwał i zasad została oceniona

krytycznie, gdyż zachodzi podejrzenie, że są one tylko przykrywką dla elit żądnych władzy i jest to utopia, która jest narzędziem manipulacji społecznej.

Tak więc idea zrównoważonego rozwoju ma być modelem rzeczywistości, zapowiedzią realizacji tego modelu, a przynajmniej próbą podjęcia działań dla osiągnięcia zaplanowanego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, utopia, Szczyt Ziemi

Introduction

Even Aristotle said: the perfect shape can be imagined as you wish but you should avoid impossibility. The idea of sustainable development and its difficult implementation are sometimes perceived as a myth. First of all, they are viewed from the wish point of view instead of the practical one. The above is noted by various researchers who assess that idea in a negative way, comparing it to utopia. Others are less radical in stating that utopias play an important role in social sciences because they indicate the needs of changes and improvements. In the event of feeling alienation and threat, a growing number of sick and hungry people, anxieties arising from destabilisation of natural systems and wars, it is necessary to search for new solutions connected with transformation of the existing political and economic order. Zbigniew Hull states that even if the vision of sustainable development means utopia to a large extent, such utopia, presenting the possibilities of a different manner of using the nature, social and individual life, is what we need nowadays (Hull, 2003). The utopian perception of the sustainable development rule cannot be focused on perfect visions of a better world but on searching for the opportunities which would allow its implementation.

Utopia concepts

The notion of utopia is often connected with negative associations. It contains simplifications, artificial examples and naive faith of the authors that their imagined world can come true, which are perceived in negative way. Utopia is often associated with people who wish to implement unrealistic ideas. However, when utopia affects the shape of culture of a given period or stimulates mass movements, radical social and historical changes, nothing prevents creation of new concepts. Bronisław Baczko said that: Nothing prevents us from creating new, perfect communities, but also the fact of establishing that type of paradigm for imagination encourages us to *play Utopia*. Therefore, intellectual practice within the utopia paradigm contribute in a way to answering the important question of modernity, the question of the possibility of creating a self-establishing society not based on any order which would be external towards the world, but combining the individuals into a community having full power. It is, using the term created by Max Weber, a *disenchanted* society which is not deprived of dreams and own imagination system (Baczko, 1994).

The Enlightenment became the turning point for the utopian thought. In that period, the *place utopia* was transformed into *time utopia*. Currently, there are no unknown places and utopia ceases to be understood as separated from the real life. The contemporary utopias are closer to history and to everyday life. The conviction that changes are necessary does not mean waiting but constitutes an active transformation of such reality within the limits of the existing social, political and economic opportunities. Such vision of transformation is close to the *utopianism* of Immanuel Wallerstein where illusion and *wishing* is replaced with searching for actual historical alternatives for the existing order (Wasyluk, 2009).

The possible is richer than the real, states I. Wallerstein. Why we are so afraid of considering the possible things, analysing the possible things and exploring them. We have to move utopianism to the centre of social sciences, instead of utopia. It constitutes an analysis of the possible utopias, their restrictions and obstacles preventing its implementation. It constitutes the reconciliation of searching for truth and searching for good (Wallerstein, 2004). That concept of the American historian and sociologist is a concept of utopianism which constitutes historical knowledge and simultaneously the vision of just society. In the concept of *specific utopia*, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch states that if we care about better tomorrow, we have to act today. Jerzy Szacki emphasises that an utopian may be wrong in diagnosis and forecast but his effort does not become irrelevant because of that as it is mainly about proving that one cannot agree with the reality and should search for an ideal. There is no progress, movement, action without utopia (Szacki, 1980). He also notes that utopians were born in societies in the state of crisis and disorder, doubt and uncertainty. Although utopian thinking may lead to violent rebellions but it may also give rise to changes of the existing order in the right direction. If it was not possible until now, using human reason, to create a safe civilisation all around the world, there is no need to create a new utopia? It can be an idea of sustainable development which creates the opportunities because it notices the existence of global problems and threats for human existence and also holds better cognition measures.

The sustainable development idea

The concept of sustainable development was created as a result of a discussion aimed at developing solutions for the most urgent international and global

problems in the social, economic and ecological areas. It does not mean faith in achieving new, better worlds which function on the basis of freedom, equality and brotherhood, without diseases and suffering. The sustainable development studies are multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary which allows creation of a holistic model of reality. The idea of sustainable development does not fully constitute utopian thinking which assumes that the imagined reality is impossible to achieve. Although certain elements seem to be excluded from the real world, they may become achievable after the conditions for their implementation are created. The authors of sustainable development programs do not describe perfect visions of a better world which should replace the reality but search for mechanism which allow their gradual implementation. The starting point is the existing order of social structure. The sustainable development idea is a kind of plan. It is an instruction on how to achieve the intended social order. It also constitutes the regulations setting the norms of interpersonal relations. That plan can always be improved, amended, reinterpreted. The planners do not intend to question or liquidate the *structural certainties* of the democratic order. Their task is to order the modern pluralist democracy. Integration of invention and activity measures is supposed to be the solution to that. However, social order cannot exist in the area divided by national borders. It has to be international because the human challenges are of global nature. The solutions should be of the same nature. Therefore, locking yourself in the national borders is not a good method of finding them. New solutions also mean comparison of the level of an individual person with micro- and macro-social level. They also have to take into account the newly occurring phenomena connected with technologies which refer to the forms of production and interpersonal communication.

In the Polish legislation, the definition of sustainable development is as follows: social and economic development which includes the process of integrating political, economic and social activities maintaining a natural balance and consistence of the basic natural processes in order to guarantee the possibility of satisfying the basic needs of specific societies or citizens both from the current generation and from the future generations.

There are voices of scientists who consider the essence of sustainable development and its implementation and note the consistence of interests (replacing generations) and integrated order (the sum of ecological, economic, social, spatial and political orders). Consistence of interests and integrated order require general adoption of the same system of values at a global scale. However, such axiological unity contradicts the idea of liberal democracy which has been developed. Thus, the sustainable development idea encounters many obstacles in its implementation.

Such obstacles are noticed by Wiesław Sztumski. The essence of sustainable development is best reflected by the notion of order. It means the integrated order being the total of five orders: ecological, social, economic, spatial and institutional (political). It means an organisation of the social system where those elements function in harmony so it can perform the tasks it was created for, as a whole. Sustainable development is all about ordering the society to the highest possible extent in its structures, mainly the economic structure, and all other structures should contribute to achievement of the goal and maintain balance. It is about the best level of organisation and not the highest level because a system organised at a highest level does not always function in the most efficient manner. Order is subordinate to the basic goal of the society and it is decided by the hierarchy of values adopted by that society. The current and future order is built on those axiological values. Therefore, implementation of sustainable development requires reference to the generally applied system of values. There is no such system and shaping a unified system of values is problematic, in particular in the liberal democracy which assumes that people spontaneously strive to achieve balance and the social system regulates itself. On the other hand, the competitive fight, not only in the economic area, fuels many conflicts in various structures. If the paradigm of the classic economic thought based on the balance between supply and demand, economic stabilisation and laminar flows of capital, goods and work is not changed and the ethical values are subordinate to the economic values, the conflict vision of the social order will still function (Sztumski, 2006).

Resolutions of the Earth Summit

Social order requires consents in selection of the system of values and determination of the basic goal to be realised by the society. It requires appropriate philosophy which will allow shaping human attitudes and behaviours around it. Until now, apart from talking about sustainable development, not much is done to implement its principles. For example, none resolutions of the Earth Summit is implemented or they are implemented in a minimum scope. Not everyone agrees to submit to the recommendations of Agenda 21 and the resolutions of the *Summit* although they were democratically adopted by governments of about 170 countries (Sztumski, 1997). The principles of the Rio Declaration from 1992 are really impressive:

Principle 1

Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

Principle 2

States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.

Principle 3

The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.

Principle 4

In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it.

Principle 5

All States and all people shall co-operate in the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, in order to decrease the disparities in standards of living and better meet the needs of the majority of the people of the world.

Principle 6

The special situation and needs of developing countries, particularly the least developed and those most environmentally vulnerable, shall be given special priority. International actions in the field of environment and development should also address the interests and needs of all countries.

Principle 7

States shall co-operate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.

Principle 8

To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, States should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies.

Principle 9

States should co-operate to strengthen endogenous capacity-building for sustainable development by improving scientific understanding through exchanges of scientific and technological knowledge, and by enhancing the development, adaptation, diffusion and transfer of technologies, including new and innovative technologies.

Principle 10

Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided.

Principle 11

States shall enact effective environmental legislation. Environmental standards, management objectives and priorities should reflect the environmental and developmental context to which they apply. Standards applied by some countries may be inappropriate and of unwarranted economic and social cost to other countries, in particular developing countries.

Principle 12

States should co-operate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation. Trade policy measures for environmental purposes should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade. Unilateral actions to deal with environmental challenges outside the jurisdiction of the importing country should be avoided. Environmental measures addressing transboundary or global environmental problems should, as far as possible, be based on an international consensus.

Principle 13

States shall develop national law regarding liability and compensation for the victims of pollution and other environmental damage. States shall also co-operate in an expeditious and more determined manner to develop further international law regarding liability and compensation for adverse effects of environmental damage caused by activities within their jurisdiction or control to areas beyond their jurisdiction.

Principle 14

States should effectively co-operate to discourage or prevent the relocation and transfer to other States of any activities and substances that cause severe environmental degradation or are found to be harmful to human health.

Principle 15

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Principle 16

National authorities should endeavour to promote the internalization of environmental costs and the use of economic instruments, taking into account the approach that the polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution, with due regard to the public interest and without distorting international trade and investment.

Principle 17

Environmental impact assessment, as a national instrument, shall be undertaken for proposed activities that are likely to have a significant adverse impact on the environment and are subject to a decision of a competent national authority.

Principle 18

States shall immediately notify other States of any natural disasters or other emergencies that are likely to produce sudden harmful effects on the environment of those States. Every effort shall be made by the international community to help States so afflicted.

Principle 19

States shall provide prior and timely notification and relevant information to potentially affected States on activities that may have a significant adverse transboundary environmental effect and shall consult with those States at an early stage and in good faith.

Principle 20

Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.

Principle 21

The creativity, ideals and courage of the youth of the world should be mobilized to forge a global partnership in order to achieve sustainable development and ensure a better future for all.

Principle 22

Indigenous people and their communities, and other local communities, have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development.

Principle 23

The environment and natural resources of people under oppression, domination and occupation shall be protected.

Principle 24

Warfare is inherently destructive of sustainable development. States shall therefore respect international law providing protection for the environment in times of armed conflict and co-operate in its further development, as necessary.

Principle 25

Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible.

Principle 26

States shall resolve all their environmental disputes peacefully and by appropriate means in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

Principle 27

States and people shall co-operate in good faith and in a spirit of partnership in the fulfilment of the principles embodied in this Declaration and in the further development of international law in the field of sustainable development. The tasks set in that document should result in new order on Earth, which would be characterised by better quality of life and existence of people in harmony with nature because human health and balanced ecosystem are the most important. However, in order to take the appropriate actions, it is necessary to establish cooperation between all nations and states around the world because the problem is global in nature. Sustainable development requires also liquidation of such phenomena as poverty and imbalance between rich and poor societies. There is a need to develop regulations concerning actions which are harmful to the environment (even including penalties). The *Rio Declaration* was another document, after the *Stockholm Declaration*, devoted to the problems of environment degradation and inequalities between the societies. Unfortunately, it is becoming a historical document. Until now, the manner of implementation of the resolutions of the Earth Summit is unknown. Perhaps the idea created there is only aimed at drawing attention away from the imperfect reality and focusing it on a future goal. Perhaps – states Wiesław Sztumski

– a noble idea covers maliciously masked desire of global power of a small group of wealthy citizens. Perhaps it is all about allowing mafia and economic and political monopolies to assure undivided, indiscriminate and unpunished ruling because of tricking people with empty promises for the future. The crowds of hungry, unemployed, humiliated and poor have to be calmed down somehow and they constitute over 80% of the world population. That number is going to grow because impoverishment of masses is a consequence of free market economy conducted while pursuing profits. The attempt to introduce sustainable development without changing the manner of economic thinking and modifying the social order will probably end in failure. This is the utopia which is used as a manipulation tool in the hands of the governing elites. This is also the utopia which should give more optimism and a little hope, in particular to poor people, so that they were forced to even more action, mainly work (Sztumski, 2006).

Conclusions

Those critical words concerning the idea of sustainable development also constitute a voice in the discussion. The discussion which gave rise to the sustainable development concept. The discussion aimed at developing solutions for the most urgent international and global problems in the social, economic and ecological areas. It was developed with a different attitude than the radical assumptions regarding resolution of the *ecological problem*. It does not mean faith in achieving new, better worlds which function on the basis of freedom, equality and brotherhood, without diseases and suffering. The sustainable development studies are multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary which allows creation of a holistic model of reality. The idea of sustainable development does not fully constitute utopian thinking which assumes that the imagined reality is impossible to achieve. Although certain elements seem to be excluded from the real world, they may become achievable after the conditions for their implementation are created. The authors of sustainable development programs do not describe perfect visions of a better world which should replace the reality but search for mechanism which allow their gradual implementation. However, they assume the starting

point to be the existing order of social structure. Therefore, that idea is not a form of a plan. It is an instruction on how to achieve the intended social order (Goćkowski, Machowska, 2004). The sustainable development idea as a type of utopian thinking is of double nature. It is not only the model of the desired reality but also a forecast of its implementation, or at least working in order to achieve it.

If the current rules of human actions, reasons, could not create a safe civilisation for the entire globe, will the new utopia help? In my opinion, the idea of sustainable development creates such opportunities because it notices the existence of global problems and the related threats for human existence more than any of the ideas before. It is also supported by better cognition measures. It is more efficient with respect to detecting potential and actual threats and dangers faced by the contemporary world.

Some of the statements of the most radical opponents of sustainable development can be supported. However, we are much closer to the views of the scientists who are convinced that even if we decide that sustainable development means a utopia, it is possible to at least partially implement its assumptions.

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