

BLOG POST:

Negotiating sustainable development

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Along with the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations (UN) in 2015, the topic of sustainable development has become ever more relevant. The SDGs address pressing needs such as ending poverty and hunger, ensuring healthy lives and education for all, and protecting the environment. Some of the goals are pursued at the tables of international trade negotiators: for example, the European Union promotes sustainable development in its free trade agreement (FTA) talks. How realistic is this aim to connect trade and sustainable development? How has sustainable development been discussed in the international arenas in the first place; by whom, where, and when?

The notion of sustainable development has its origins in the international debate on environmental protection from the 1960s. This was when environmental consciousness started to gain prominence among researchers and the civil society in the Global North. One of the earliest international arenas to discuss the challenge of maintaining sustainability *together with* economic growth and development was at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 in Stockholm. The term **sustainable** started to show up in various connections: first, the Club of Rome report *Limits to growth* from 1972 presented an idea of a world system that would be sustainable and capable of satisfying the basic material needs of the people. This idea became the basis for today's understanding of the SDGs.

It took some years before the notion developed further. The concept **sustainable development** was introduced in the *World Conservation Strategy* of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1980. This was the first international document on the conservation of living resources that was produced in collaboration with governments, non-governmental organization, and other experts. The report influenced the subsequent discussion at the UN World Commission on Environment and Development meeting, led by Gro Harlem Brundtland, and its famous report *Our Common Future* in 1987. The “Brundtland Report” introduced the definition of sustainable development, still used today: “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (United Nations General Assembly, 1987).

Whereas the awareness on sustainability originally emerged in the Global North, it was discussed in international arenas including the Global South and thus resulted in important international conventions. A significant step was taken at the renowned “Rio Conference”, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (also called the Earth Summit, or Rio Summit). The conference aimed at agreeing on sustainable development that would include both economic and social aims, and discussed pollution, production, and alternative sources of energy. It resulted in an agreement on climate change, which later led to a commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, further agreed in the Paris Agreement of 2016 by 196 countries.

At the same time, sustainable development issues entered international trade negotiations. Countries of the Global North brought the topic to the table at the World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in the 1990s, but received opposition from countries of the Global South

that were concerned about possible protectionism towards their exports. Developing countries lack technologies, capital and knowledge needed for production that protects both people and the environment; the advanced countries have a comparative advantage here. However, the situation has gradually changed in the 2000s, as the EU in particular has taken an approach of consultations instead of sanctioning any ‘misconduct’ on environmental and labour protection by FTA partners. Therefore, developing countries no longer view the issue of sustainable development as a direct threat to their exports.

One of the first agreements to include references to sustainable development is the EU-CARIFORUM Economic Partnership Agreement signed in 2008 with the Caribbean countries, followed by the EU-Korea FTA signed in 2009. These agreements contain several *trade and sustainable development issues* concerning both environmental and labour protection. Others have followed, and the statements of sustainable development are becoming more common in FTAs. This opens the potential for harmonizing the issue within a geographically broader multilateral agreement in the future.

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