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Sustainable development: A critical review

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Abstract

Over the past few years, "Sustainable Development" (SD) has emerged as the latest development catchphrase. A wide range of nongovernmental as well as governmental organizations have embraced it as the new paradigm of development. A review of the literature that has sprung up around the concept of SD indicates, however, a lack of consistency in its interpretation. More important, while the all-encompassing nature of the concept gives it political strength, its current formulation by the mainstream of SD thinking contains significant weaknesses. These include an incomplete perception of the problems of poverty and environmental degradation, and confusion about the role of economic growth and about the concepts of sustainability and participation. How these weaknesses can lead to inadequacies and contradictions in policy making is demonstrated in the context of international trade, agriculture, and forestry. It is suggested that if SD is to have a fundamental impact, politically expedient fuzziness will have to be given up in favor of intellectual clarity and rigor.

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