



# Sustainable Development: Reality Or Myth?

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## Abstract

Since the United Nations Environment Conference in Stockholm (1972), the concept of sustainable development has steadily made its way among individual scientists and international organizations. The apotheosis of this development was the adoption by the United Nations in 2015 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

However, many scientists and politicians were skeptical about the concept of sustainable development, since the results of implementing sustainable development in different countries were far from expected. Many decisions taken at the level of the UN and other international organizations turned out to be unfulfilled.

In my opinion, as well as some other Russian scientists, the concept of sustainable development is an unrealistic project, it is a myth, although it is very positive and humane. Sustainable development goals can be achieved only by the most economically developed countries entering the era of post-industrialism. In other industrial and especially pre-industrial countries, that make up the vast majority of the world, achieving these goals is impossible. Since the environment is a single inextricable geosystem, sustainable development can only be achieved at the global level, which is not possible in the present and near future.

However, sustainable development projects carried out in different countries are actually rational nature management in selected countries.

**Keywords:** Environment, Sustainable development, International conferences, Controlled crisis, Geosystem, Attainable ideal, Nature management

## History of The Formation of the Term “Sustainable Development”

The English term “Sustainable Development” originally appeared in environmental natural management as an application to fisheries resources, and later to forest resources. This term meant the use of resources that would not be depleted. Thus, initially the term was used with a focus on local ecosystems, and only much later the term was reoriented to the entire global geosystem.<sup>1,2</sup>

In 1972, the first UN Conference on the Environment took place in Stockholm. The most important conclusion of this conference is the recognition of the inextricable link between the environment, social and economic development. The result was the creation of the International Commission on Environment and Development (ICED), chaired by the former Prime Minister of Norway H

Brundtland, which prepared for 1987. The report “Our Common Future”, which substantiated the triune development as the only real way for the further development of civilization.<sup>3</sup> The Commission defined sustainable development (SD) as “development that can meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

It should be noted that the Soviet scientist DL Armand back in the 60s of the last century, developing ideas for rational environmental natural management, wrote: “The moral duty of each generation is to leave natural resources to the next generation in better condition and in greater quantities than it received from previous”.<sup>4</sup> If in those years the USSR had been actively included in the international copyright system, then perhaps today the priority in using the SD concept would have been with Russia, and not with H Brundtland.

Quick Response Code:



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Thus, SD is an ideology of balancing the interests of generations within the framework of the geocological paradigm, which prescribes a fair distribution of limited resources. It assumes a balance of three components: social stability, economic development and high environmental quality. Coordination of these components and their translation into the language of specific actions that are means of achieving sustainable development is a task of enormous complexity, since all three elements of SD must be considered in a balanced way.

20 years after the Conference in Stockholm, i.e. In 1992, the second UN Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro, which was supposed to summarize the activities of countries to implement the decisions of the Stockholm conference and outline paths for the future. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that if the first conference was called a conference on the environment, the second conference was already called a conference on environment and development. And this fact alone emphasized the inextricable connection between the state of the environment and development. It is very important to firmly adhere to the principles of the Rio Declaration, which ensures economic growth only in conjunction with the processes of social development and environmental safety.

After the Rio Conference, the scope of use of the concept of sustainable development has constantly expanded its scope - both geographically, as more and more countries are beginning to use various sustainability assessments to analyze socio-economic development, environmental conditions, etc., and in content - it has constantly expanded, covering all new aspects of the development of society.

In 2000, the UN Millennium Summit was held under the overall theme "The Role of the UN in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". The summit was accepted Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2001) which are eight international development goals that countries have agreed to achieve by 2015.

Humanity has made significant progress in achieving the MDGs; progress was observed on all goals and objectives. The world's material well-being has increased and the problem of hunger has eased. For example, Currently, 836 million people live on less than \$1.25 a day, while as in 1990, this number was more than double - 1.9 billion people. The mobilization of the efforts of the international community also made it possible to reduce child mortality by more than half compared to 1990 from 90 to 43 cases per 1 thousand children. Significant progress has been made in the fight against malaria, HIV and other diseases. At the same time, the UN states that progress in implementing the MDGs has been uneven, with some regions lagging noticeably behind others. In addition, the Millennium Goals have been criticized for their lack of environmental considerations protect nature aspects and for their lack of linkage between all aspects of sustainable development.

In 1997, the special 19<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly "Rio-92+5" was held in New York following the results of the five-year period of implementation of the decisions of "Rio-92". It revealed the lack of effect from the decisions of "Rio-92", the lack of real achievements. For example, states made commitments not to exceed 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions, but few fulfilled these commitments, and the United States even increased these emissions by 25%, etc.

The total amount of spending required to implement the objectives of Agenda 21 was also revised - they amounted not to \$650 billion, as previously expected, but to about \$1.5 trillion. However, the allocation of such funds is problematic.

It was decided to hold the next Rio+10 summit in 2002 in Johannesburg (South Africa) under the name "World Summit on Sustainable Development". As you can see, the very name of the summit has changed - the mention of the environment has disappeared! The environment has begun to take a backseat, and the documents adopted at the summit confirm this. The summit concluded that many of the commitments and promises made at the Rio de Janeiro conference (1992) were unfulfilled. Experts admit that the final documents of the summit are not specific; they contain virtually no details on the implementation of the declared goals. The majority of summit participants assessed its work as failed and ineffective. In December 2009, the UN General Assembly decided to hold the UN Conference on Sustainable Development "Rio+20" in Brazil in 2012. Taking into account public opinion, there was still some hope that the Rio+20 summit would ensure a reversal of the emerging negative trends, the key to which was the discussion that had begun to resolve the stated problems.

In general, according to public environmental organizations, the Rio+20 summit turned out to be extremely weak in its impact on the situation in the world, an event that was unable to outline effective ways out of the global environmental and social crisis.

The final declaration of the summit as a whole is very vague. However, a decision was made to launch the process of developing the Sustainable Development Goals, which in 2015 should "replace" the Millennium Development Goals, and a decision was made to create a new high-level forum on sustainable development at the UN General Assembly. At the same time, countries have failed to make a decision on protecting biodiversity in international waters, and the paragraph on the elimination of fossil fuel subsidies, according to experts, simply repeats the text of the decision adopted by the G20 countries at the summit in Pittsburgh in 2009.

On September 25, 2015, at UN headquarters in New York, world leaders endorsed the Post-2030 Development Agenda.

The new goals and objectives are comprehensive and indivisible and ensure a balance of all three components of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. The most

important UN decision - 193 countries adopted 17 global SDGs. Sustainable Development Goals is Goals are a universal call to action to eradicate poverty, protect our planet, improve the quality of life and improve prospects for all people around the world.<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to see that the SDGs build on the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals and aim to continue efforts to end poverty in all its forms. The Sustainable Development Goals differ significantly from the Millennium Development Goals in their comprehensive nature and greater specificity. What makes the new goals unique is that they call on all countries-poor, rich and middle-income-to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognize that poverty eradication must be inextricably linked to the implementation of policies that promote economic growth and address a range of social needs, including education, health, social protection and employment opportunities, while addressing the challenges posed by changing climate, and ensuring environmental protection.

The Rockefeller Foundation argues that “the key to financing and achieving the SDGs is mobilizing a greater share of the more than US\$200 trillion in annual flows of private capital investment for development, and philanthropy has a critical role to play in catalyzing this shift.” Major sponsors participating in a design thinking workshop organized by Rockefeller Foundation, were realistic. They concluded that while there is a moral imperative to achieve the SDGs, failure is inevitable unless there are radical changes in our path to financing large-scale change.

Development assistance in general has been criticized: for decades, one thing has been declared from high tribunes (solving problems in the near future, increasing the spending of developed countries on assistance to developing ones, etc.), but in practice this does not happen.

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 established the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

The HLPF is the UN's central platform for follow-up and review of the implementation of SDGs 2030 and the SDGs at the global level.

The first meeting of the Forum took place in 2013. The Forum replaced the Commission on Sustainable Development, which was created in 1992. The Forum adopts political declarations agreed upon at the intergovernmental level.

The HLPF 2023, under the auspices of the General Assembly, held the second SDG Summit in New York in September 2023, entitled **“Accelerating recovery from coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and fully implementing the 2030 Agenda for SD at all levels.”** This marked the start of a new phase of accelerated

progress towards achieving the SDGs, with high-level political leadership for transformative and accelerated action leading to 2030.

The summit, convened by the President of the General Assembly, marked the halfway point towards the deadline set for achieving the SDGs. As noted in the outcome documents, the Summit responded to the impact of the interconnected crises facing the world and is expected to renew a sense of hope, optimism and enthusiasm for the 2030 Agenda.

Voluntary National Reviews play an important role in the work of the Forum. As part of the follow-up and review mechanisms of the 2030 Agenda for SD, the Forum called on member states to “conduct regular and inclusive country-led and country-driven reviews of progress at national and subnational levels.” It is expected that these national reviews will serve as the basis for regular reviews of the HLPF. Regular reviews should be voluntary, conducted by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders.

Voluntary national reviews are designed to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with the aim of accelerating the implementation of SD for 2030. The reviews also help strengthen the performance of government agencies, as well as mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the SDGs.

In 2023, the next meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on UN SD was held. This year, Russia did not submit a voluntary report on results in achieving the SDGs. The only time Russia presented such a report was only in 2020, although many countries (for example, Kazakhstan) have already submitted similar reports 2-3 times.

Having analyzed the level of sustainable development in Russia, the research team of the Institute for Emerging Market Studies (IEMS) of the Skolkovo Business School determined the sustainability zone using the Four-Dimensional Criteria Concept (FCC), which is characterized by a combination of economic, social, environmental and managerial factors.

Economic sustainability can be defined as “the ability of an economic system to create conditions for constant and increasing growth of economic indicators.

Social sustainability is defined as “the ability to provide wealth (security, health, education) that is distributed fairly across social classes and across gender lines.

Environmental sustainability can be defined as “the ability to maintain over a long period of time the three basic functions of the environment: the resource-providing function, the waste-collection function, and the direct-usability function.

Institutional (Managerial) sustainability of the system is based on accountability, transparency, rule of law and ethical standards.

A country's position on each dimension is determined by its unique combination of specific strengths and weaknesses.

The relationship between economic, social, environmental and management factors make it possible to establish a kind of "longitude" and "latitude" of almost any country in this four-dimensional space Figure 1.

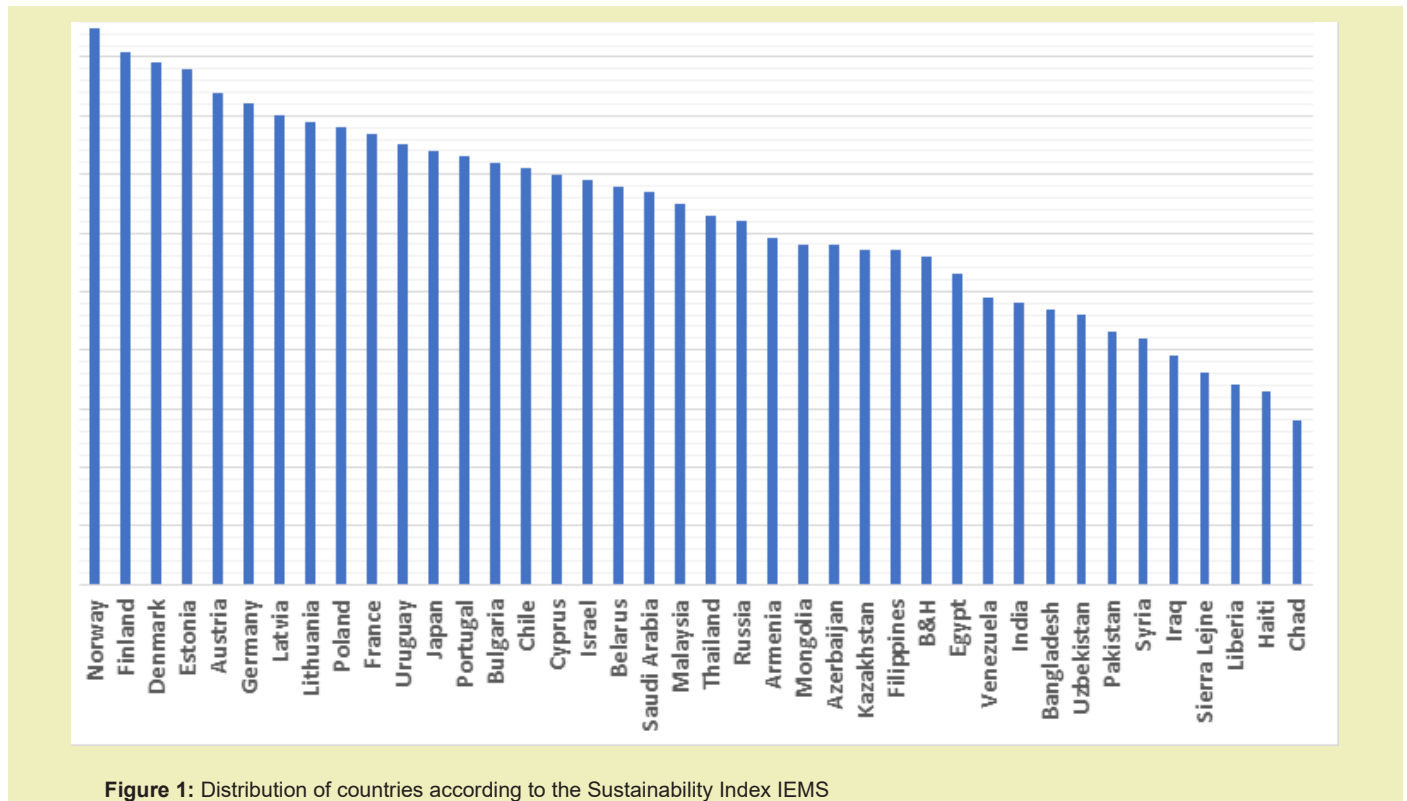


Figure 1: Distribution of countries according to the Sustainability Index IEMS

And yet, according to many Russian scientists, given the existing experience, one should not expect to achieve the SDGs in the foreseeable future. However, it is possible to make some problems easier to solve, and to achieve greater alignment of development assistance with policies in other areas.

### Criticism of the Concept of "Sustainable Development"

In general, there are serious objections to the concept of SD, both among some foreign and Russian scientists. In principle, the idea of SD is extremely humane and noble. But a number of scientists believe that this concept, despite its enormous humanistic role, is more of a slogan or a myth than a scientific concept.

The main arguments of general criticism can be formulated as follows:

- Greater specificity in decisions is needed, without which all good wishes will remain unfulfilled
- The utopian nature of the SD concept lies in the fact that there is no single global center that would guarantee its implementation, and there is no "pre-established harmony" that would lead to success. Everything depends on a person's actions and on his moral qualities

- Huge costs are required. Thus, according to the calculations of the authors of Agenda 21, \$650 billion must be found to implement this program; and now this figure is many times higher
- In general, the "Rio 92" documents do not obligate anyone to anything: their implementation would have made sense at a time when the environmental crisis was just beginning, but now they seem insufficient

AA Kulyasova explored the concept of sustainable development.<sup>6</sup> She concluded that the main shortcoming of sustainable development is the focus on the economic model and social processes. Specific geo-ecological (or environmental) problems remain on the periphery in this approach, and the economic system is viewed as a largely isolated, closed system. It seems that the economy exists on its own, and the connections with the geo-ecological system, although recognized, are not directly addressed.

The principle of consumption and economic efficiency are still dominant in this model. Currently, this is the dominant model, which is unable to solve not only environmental, but also socio-economic problems. Therefore, the geo-ecological situation on the planet as a whole is deteriorating, geo-ecological and social risks

are increasing - the number of deaths from hunger, disease, man-made accidents and disasters, and environmental disasters is growing in the world.

The largest Russian scientist, academician N. N. Moiseev, believed that a purely technical or technological way to overcome crises does not exist at all.<sup>7</sup> Energy-saving technologies, water, air, soil purification and nature conservation are not sufficient to overcome the inevitable environmental crisis. Measures are needed that can qualitatively change the planetary environmental situation. To do this, people will have to change the scale of values and even the very process of human development, which will require coordinated actions of all peoples of the planet. NN Moiseev believed that the concept of SD is a dangerous delusion and gives rise to illusions that, to some extent, reassure public opinion. In fact, the potential capabilities of modern civilization have been exhausted or are close to being exhausted.

In modern conditions, believes NN Moiseev, solving global geo-ecological problems is hardly possible. The competition between the two economic systems ended in the defeat of the centrally controlled economy. The planet is turning into a single market space, and the gap between states is widening. Capital will concentrate in countries with high levels of labor productivity, and these countries will continue to get richer. It is necessary to purposefully improve the economic and political order that emerged by the end of the 20th century.

And other Russian scientists are very skeptical about the strategy of sustainable development. They believe that the strategy is based on the expectation of a miracle: the hope that minimizing human impacts on the environment will lead to the preservation of the biosphere as a life support system. The reality is this: humanity is already living in a collapsing world, in conditions of a growing environmental crisis, which is turning into a crisis of civilization. Nevertheless, they believe that the accumulated intellectual potential can stop the destruction of nature.

The leader of the International Social-Ecological Union S. Zabelin believes that humanity's opportunity to follow the path of SD has already been missed.<sup>8</sup> He considers Agenda 21 a document that contains a huge number of compromises, unrealistic hopes and myths. A global crisis will happen quite soon. The globalization process currently taking place in the world only accelerates and intensifies the crisis. International corporations have subjugated global information processes, monopolized the media, and manipulate mass consciousness.

The conditions and goals of SD are very utopian. In particular, the task of reducing resource consumption is very correct, but can be achieved in a very distant future. Or the need to preserve a stable biosphere is, in principle, an incorrect formulation of the problem, because the biosphere, as a system, is always stable, otherwise it would have died long ago. That is, the biosphere copes with its

responsibilities quite well; it simply does not need to be disturbed. In the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that it will be possible to reduce the load on the biosphere and implement the principles of sustainable development for the whole world.

DI Lyury writes that the concept of sustainable development should consist of a system of restrictions: restrictions on population growth, restrictions on the growth of individual consumption, restrictions on the growth of resource use efficiency, restrictions on the destruction of ecosystems, restrictions on democracy and freedoms, restrictions (regrettably) scientifically-technological development.<sup>9</sup> And further D Lyury concludes that humanity in the coming decades will not be able to agree, much less implement these restrictions. Therefore, the most likely, according to D. Lyury, will be further destabilization of the situation, which will lead to a global environmental crisis, and the concept of sustainable development will remain "a horizon that you will never get closer to." Moreover, this crisis is not a mistake in the development of mankind, but a natural stage in the development of civilization. "Therefore," concludes D Lyury, "we need, hoping for a "closer to the horizon" - SD, to prepare for the real prospect - a controlled crisis."

Of course, SD is a goal to strive for, it is an ideal. SD is a global process and it can only be achieved at the global level. There cannot be sustainable development in one country or in one region, since the environment is a single, global, inextricable geosystem. It cannot be divided into parts: continents, regions, countries, regions, etc. Just as there cannot be an environment in a single country or region, there cannot be sustainable development in a single country or region.

Rapid post-industrial growth of the late 20<sup>th</sup> - early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. occurs with the simultaneous spread of poverty, degradation of all natural ecosystems in territories not covered by post-industrial transformation; In the post-industrial community, the severity of the problems of environmental degradation is somewhat reduced. SD is an extremely complex process that, in principle, can only be carried out in developed countries with high technologies. Only such a society is capable of consciously (but the question is whether it will want to) make serious restrictions and at the same time maintain and increase its socio-economic potential. It is not difficult to conclude that such a function can only be performed by a post-industrial society. An industrial society, and even more so a pre-industrial one, cannot even dream of sustainable development.

In post-industrial countries, in recent years the problem of sustainable development has been most actively discussed, which, as an alternative to consumer society, completely falls into the mainstream of post-industrial transformation.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, sustainable development is, in principle, possible only in the conditions of global post-industrialism. The documents of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro emphasized that the "overconsumption" of resources

by developed countries, on the one hand, and the poverty of the majority of the world's population, on the other, are closely interconnected. This leads to the conclusion about the need to reduce the gap in the level of development, which is a necessary condition for the transition to sustainable development. However in the conditions of post-industrial transformation, this gap will only increase, and, therefore, the hope for the implementation of SD at the global level is unrealistic. Excluding geographical inequality development that has developed in the context of the transition to the post-industrial phase of development, it is unrealistic to solve global problems associated with environmental degradation, including the problem of sustainable development.

Since post-industrial society is just beginning to take shape in the most developed countries, sustainable development on a global scale is also out of the question.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, while the world is dominated by economic growth,<sup>12</sup> the expansion of production and consumption and sustainable development is also not possible. Therefore, apparently, those scientists who consider the concept of sustainable development utopian are right. For example, academician N.N. Moiseev in 1994 stated: "It seems to me that the concept of sustainable development is one of the most dangerous misconceptions of our time, especially in the form in which it is interpreted by politicians and economists".<sup>7</sup> IN AND. VI.

Danilov Danilyan and KS Losev write that the idea of sustainable development has not yet had any significant impact on the real development of the world economy. / Business relies on scientific and technological progress, which can only delay the onset of a global geo-ecological environmental catastrophe, and current policies are focused to measures of a regional nature that are attractive to the electorate. This is precisely the path of development now and will continue at least in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

Another thing is that in certain regions, in certain countries, environmental nature management (or nature use) projects can and should be implemented. But these projects cannot be projects to implement sustainable development; rather, they are projects that are able to take control of the environmental crisis, i.e. "controlled crisis" projects.<sup>11</sup>

For example, in the Russian Federation, the republics of Mordovia, Chuvashia and the Ulyanovsk region this summer signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of carbon control in terms of achieving SD goals. It involves the creation of test sites for the development and testing of technologies for monitoring carbon balance, remote and ground-based monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions and other parameters significant for climate change. In the Republic of Chuvashia, work has already begun on creating a carbon test site as part of the project "Volga - an ecological environmental breakthrough region for sustainable development."

Or the Samara region has set a goal by 2025 to reduce the volume of polluted wastewater discharged into the Volga River by three times (by 200 million cubic meters). To achieve this, in the coming years, 30 treatment facilities will be built in the region using the latest technologies.

In Germany Union of German Cities and Communities developed communal seasonal calendar is a collection of sustainability ideas for all 52 weeks of the year. The calendar offers different ideas for local implementation related to the UN Sustainable Development Agenda. For example, projects against bee deaths, "Repair-Days" with tips on fixing faulty appliances, and open-air cinema screenings with films on the topic of sustainable development.

As stated by the head of the Center for Regional Policy of the Russian Academy of National Economy, V.V. Klimanov, "The sustainable development goals defined by the UN are the general line of human development. It can be scaled to different territories, including individual countries, regions, and even cities. If regions are developing long-term plans in the form of socio-economic development strategies, then the inclusion here as basic principles of the provisions contained in the Sustainable Development Goals is fully justified."

In our opinion, VV Klimanov's statement and the activities carried out in the regions of Russia or Germany cannot in any way be actions within the framework of SD. These are excellent and extremely useful examples of "controlled crisis" or environmental rational nature management projects in individual regions.

## Conclusion

The concept of SD is positive and useful.

However, its implementation is not possible either now or in the coming centuries, since it can be implemented exclusively at the global level, since our environment is a global, unified, inextricable geosystem. At the same time, the world consists of a small number of developed post-industrial countries that can (and not all of them) take the path of sustainable development, and a huge number of industrial or pre-industrial countries that cannot yet even dream of sustainable development.

Therefore, we can conclude that the concept of SD is a myth.

An alternative to sustainable development is rational environmental nature management, which can be implemented in any, even a very small area of our planet.

However, given the support that the concept of sustainable development has received in the world and its enormous educational potential, apparently there is no point in abandoning it, but always keep in mind that in fact we are not talking about sustainable development, but about rational environmental nature management in a particular region of the globe.

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## Conflicts of Interest

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