

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL EQUITY

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**Abstract.** Sustainable development, a universally recognized civilizational paradigm, necessitates a balanced approach to socio-economic progress and environmental preservation. This paper argues that social equity is a foundational ethical principle crucial for achieving sustainable development. It explores the intricate, intrinsic link between these two concepts, tracing the historical evolution of equity from antiquity through modern philosophical thought to establish its theoretical underpinnings. The study employs qualitative research methods, including analysis, synthesis, comparison, induction, and deduction, drawing on specialized literature. Findings demonstrate that social equity, encompassing equal opportunities, fair resource distribution, non-discrimination, and intergenerational fairness, directly contributes to mitigating social inequality, preventing conflict, and reducing poverty. The article further highlights the concrete connection by examining how the principle of social equity underpins specific United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as those related to health, gender equality, decent work, and justice. It emphasizes the vital role of education and non-governmental organizations in fostering values and behavioral changes essential for building economically developed, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable societies.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, Sustainability, Equity, Social Equity, Social Justice.

**JEL Classification:** Q01, Q56

### **Introduction**

The natural environment is globally threatened, and its protection is becoming a primary task for humanity because it is related to humanity's survival. All societies are in danger due to environmental changes; therefore, achieving ecological balance, humanizing the relationship between humans and nature, and respecting nature and its laws are necessary. To solve the above-mentioned problems, sustainable development must be implemented.

The contemporary era is characterized by a distinct dichotomy between escalating societal demands and the diminishing regenerative capacity of the biosphere. Sustainable development represents a paradigm attempting to resolve this contradiction by advancing universally valid, humanistic values that explicitly reject the predatory exploitation of the natural environment. Consequently, a comprehensive sustainable development strategy necessitates the articulation of a fundamentally revised conceptual framework for freedom and responsibility, one that moves beyond treating nature merely as an input commodity for economic production.

Currently, sustainable development is a path without visible alternatives for ensuring ecological security, social equity, and economic well-being. It is intended to ensure development and progress at both societal and global levels. For the successful achievement of sustainable development goals, it must be based on its main ethical principle: social equity.

### **Methodology**

The informational support for this work includes specialized literature related to sustainable development and social equity. Various research methods were also employed, such as analysis, synthesis, the comparative method, induction, and deduction. The methodology used in the work reveals its interdisciplinary nature.

### **Results and Discussion**

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Social equity has been a perennial subject of scholarly inquiry since antiquity. Nevertheless, the examination of the relationship between social equity and sustainable development commenced relatively recently. This timing correlates with the emergence of the concept of sustainable development, which gained prominence in the 1980s following the realization that environmental degradation presented an existential threat to planetary life. The integration of social equity into sustainable development discourse began in the latter half of the last century, coinciding with the growing recognition of their mutual influence: social equity can indeed foster the acceleration of sustainable development, and, conversely, sustainable development outcomes can elevate the level of social equity.

The term "equity" derives from the Latin *aequitas*, signifying "justice," "impartiality," and "moderation." The concept of equity, however, is notably ambiguous, finding application across numerous contemporary domains and carrying diverse meanings, such as those related to justice, economics, education, social welfare, politics, culture, media, and health (Gorincioi, 2009). The theoretical foundations for understanding the notion of equity were laid down in the works of Plato, Aristotle, T. Hobbes, J. Locke, J. J. Rousseau, I. Kant, G. Hegel, K. Marx, J. Rawls, A. Sen and other prominent thinkers.

Various thinkers have studied the issues of social equity for centuries. With reference to equity, a series of conceptual questions have been formulated, including: How must an individual's behavior be in order for it to be called equitable? What are the defining features of an equitable state? Is it generally feasible to build an equitable state? Philosophers in Ancient Greece tried to answer these questions, as well as others related to equity. Thus, for Socrates, in public life, people must respect both the laws and the principles of truth and justice.

Analyzing the concept of equity, Plato relates it to that of virtue. In his opinion, equity is one of the cardinal virtues. It contributes to the harmonization of the other three cardinal virtues, which are: wisdom, courage and temperance. At the same time, for Plato, equity is the virtue through which the soul flourishes and without which the soul languishes (Plato, 1923). In Aristotle's opinion, "it is fair to forgive human weaknesses, to take into account the purposes of people's actions; we must look at the whole, not just a part; to consider not only what the individual is at present, but also what his character is in general". He furthermore posited that it is equitable to recall virtuous conduct over malevolent acts, and benefits rendered over those received, alongside a disposition to endure offense patiently (Georgescu, 1998).

Among the most seminal works of the 20th century addressing social justice (a discourse in which the concepts of 'equity,' 'fairness,' and 'justice' are frequently employed interchangeably, notwithstanding their nuanced distinctions) is John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. In Rawls's opinion, the concept of justice is very important for the in-depth analysis of social systems. For him, moral criteria play a critical role in the evaluation of social systems.

Equity, as a complex social phenomenon, continues to be the focus of researchers' attention. Currently, there are various approaches and interpretations of this phenomenon. However, it is a unanimously accepted fact that equity performs regulatory functions of the social system, having different forms, such as: political, legal, moral and economic.

Social crises, turning points in social development highlight the problems of social equity. Currently, humanity is shaken by several wars, economic and demographic crises, and ecological problems are becoming more serious, and, respectively, the problem of social equity is becoming more and more acute, because it is social equity that can serve as an impetus for positive social changes. Social equity can constitute a solid foundation for solving various social problems.

Social equity, which is an important social principle, contributes to maintaining social order, favors the equal and fair distribution of material and non-material resources, and substantiates the need for equal opportunities and rights for all members of society. Social equity implies respect

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---

for the interests of each person, regardless of their social status, gender, nationality, race, or other characteristics.

The main aspects of social equity are the following:

Equality of opportunity. This implies ensuring equal opportunities for all members of society regarding employment, education, healthcare, and other areas of life.

Equality before the law and equal rights. This refers to equal rights for all members of society.

Preventing and combating discrimination. No one should be discriminated against on the basis of race, gender, age, disability or other characteristics.

Ensuring social protection. People from vulnerable groups should receive social assistance, as the poor, the homeless, children, the elderly and people with disabilities cannot even secure the minimum necessary for survival.

Equitable distribution of resources. All members of a society have the right to access resources. The distribution of all resources, both material and non-material, should be carried out in an equitable manner that eliminates or reduces social inequalities and poverty.

Respect for diversity. Differences between people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds should be recognized and respected.

Social equity has always been understood as an integral social phenomenon and an essential attribute of the social system. However, the perception of the content of the concept of social equity is determined by the social, cultural, political and other peculiarities of social development. Currently, social equity is perceived as inherent in society, as are values such as life itself, freedom, justice, equality and dignity. Social equity plays an important role in ensuring the progress of society, it contributes to the consolidation of social stability and solidarity. Through social equity, social cohesion is achieved, in the sense of active and responsible participation in democratic processes and mechanisms within society, aiming for each person to achieve their aspirations as much as possible (Gorincioi, 2009).

The progress of modern society is contingent upon social unity and a "social agreement" regarding the fundamental, essential issues of the social system's structure and functioning. Such agreement can only be achieved if all members of society acknowledge the legitimacy of the existing order. Therefore, the primary functions of equity in society are to legitimize the prevailing social structure and maintain social order. Social equity aims to confer social significance on as many individuals as possible. In order to achieve the necessary balance between collectivity and individuality, between public and private interests, the principles of social equity must be respected.

Regarding the relationship between sustainable development and social equity, it can be safely stated that social equity serves as a fundamental ethical principle for sustainable development. Adherence to the principle of social equity is important for sustainable development because it contributes to the elimination or mitigation of social inequality.

Sustainable development is a process of continuous transformation. It pursues the well-being of society, contributing to the formation of a new culture of consumption, which would combat consumerism. Sustainable development also contributes to solving environmental problems, to improving relations between humanity and the natural environment. Sustainable development orients humanity to satisfy its own needs, but also to leave this possibility to future generations.

Sustainable development aims to reconcile the development process with environmental quality, as well as to promote an integrated development and decision-making process at global, regional, national and local levels (Litvin and Dobrovolschi, 2022). Also, one of the main goals of sustainability is to preserve ecosystem integrity and conserve biodiversity. Sustainable development aims to increase economic efficiency and support the principles of social equity. Ultimately, sustainable development ensures environmental sustainability, enabling future

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*Chisinau, Republic of Moldova*

---

generations to meet their vital needs. This pursuit is characterized by its dedication to economic efficiency, compatibility with the biosphere, and social equity. Sustainable development is a systemic approach to phenomena that ensures the coherence of organizational subsystems—economic, social, productive, and environmental—thereby facilitating the equitable distribution of resources to future generations. This is achievable only through meticulous, spatiotemporal record-keeping of the following interconnected factors: natural resources, the environment, population, pollution, and agricultural and industrial production (Todos, 2022).

Issues of equity and sustainability are closely linked in several ways. Among these, S. Lele and T. Jayaraman (2011) mention the following: issues related to intergenerational equity; fair treatment in solving ecological problems or respecting the rights of non-human living organisms, those that are sentient but have no voice; the correctness of calculating the social benefits and costs of projects, avoiding situations where the current actions of one actor negatively affect the current well-being of someone else, which generates the emergence of negative externalities of development activities; ecological inequity, when, for example, the preferential location of hazardous industries in neighborhoods where socially and economically marginalized groups live; equitable access to natural resources because the equitable distribution of socio-economic benefits from the use of natural resources critically depends on how the initial rights to use the resources are granted; enhancing the sustainable use of resources through equity, a fair allocation of resources.

The principle of social equity applies to several aspects of sustainable development, including intergenerational relations. The Brundtland Commission Report emphasizes that "sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Intergenerational equity is a *sine qua non* requirement, dictating that the present generation has the right to use and benefit from the Earth's resources, along with the obligation to consider the long-term impact of its activities and to sustain the resource base and global environment for the benefit of future generations (Tofan, 2014). In this regard, both the principles of social equity and sustainable development necessitate solidarity, generosity, and careful attention toward future generations. This brings the issue of resource management to the forefront. All types of resources must be consumed thoughtfully and in moderation, ensuring their accessibility for future generations.

We must demonstrate concern for the well-being of future generations. Each generation bears the responsibility to accrue and preserve an adequate amount of capital to replace that inherited from preceding generations, thereby enabling subsequent generations to experience an improved quality of life within a more equitable society. However, achieving this objective is challenging due to inherent intergenerational differences. For instance, young people, with the future ahead of them, are interested in the long-term preservation of environmental characteristics and resource levels. They tend to be more conservative with what they have and what surrounds them. The elderly, however, face a different situation, focused on the shortness of life. On this basis, they could be more selfish and more "consumeristic" (Sârbu and Albu, 2013).

At the intersection of sustainable development and equity, we find issues of distribution, encompassing both intragenerational (between groups in a society) and intergenerational allocations. A primary objective is to limit or eliminate environmental destruction by the current generation that would negatively impact future generations. Although challenging to achieve, equity applied to intergenerational relations postulates that present generations should not disrupt future generations' access to diverse forms of resources.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, provide a comprehensive framework for global development efforts. They address the three core pillars of sustainable development: environmental protection, economic growth, and social inclusion (often termed social equity or

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social sustainability). Among these, the goals whose achievement is intrinsically linked to the principle of social equity include the following:

**Goal 3: Good health and well-being.** This goal specifically aims, among other objectives, to foster optimal working conditions, thereby ensuring health and well-being in the workplace and promoting equity at work.

**Goal 5: Gender equality.** This goal focuses on achieving gender equality across economic, social, and environmental spheres, underpinned by the application of social equity principles.

**Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.** Social equity is an ethical principle in ensuring equity in employee remuneration and in creating optimal working conditions.

**Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions.** Through this goal, sustainable development aims to promote peace and social justice, which can be more easily achieved by respecting the principle of social equity (United Nations, 2015).

The close link between sustainable development and social equity can be traced at a conceptual level as well as at concrete levels, such as the Sustainable Development Goals. These goals can be achieved more easily and quickly if the principles of social equity are applied.

Equity is closely related to fairness. It assumes that within a society, all its members should not only have equitable access to the resources and opportunities of the community, but that no one should bear a disproportionate burden due to government actions. In general, fairness implies a need for fairness (not necessarily equality) in the distribution of gains and losses and the right of everyone to an acceptable quality and standard of living (Beder, 2025).

The values of sustainable development must be spread among all members of society, integrated into all areas of educational activity to promote behavioral changes, which, in turn, contribute to the development of more sustainable and equitable societies. Education and information can significantly contribute to the successful implementation of sustainable development. Consequently, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is receiving increased attention in universities worldwide. The transformation of education into sustainability education necessitates systemic thinking and interdisciplinary approaches. Universities are tasked with educating future corporate leaders and their employees, convincing them that adopting responsible business strategies focused on sustainability represents a "win-win-win proposal for companies, the environment, and society" (Grecu and Nagore, 2014).

The education sector engages a comparatively limited segment of society and is currently in the nascent stages of developing educational programs for sustainable development. Consequently, substantial efforts from other entities, such as non-governmental organizations, are also imperative. These efforts are needed to inform the general public and to empower other members of society to act as active and informed citizens in constructing a society that is economically developed, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable.

### **Conclusions**

In the modern world, the pursuit of sustainable economic development is becoming increasingly relevant and a priority. Every society strives to achieve a balance among economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability to ensure human well-being and preserve natural resources for future generations.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, innovation, economic growth, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. Achieving these goals is a particularly complicated and complex endeavor, yet it is attainable by combining the efforts of society's members who aspire to a better common future, founded on an awareness of the effects of social equity. Respecting the principle of social equity is crucial for sustainable development, as it helps mitigate social inequality, stabilizes economic, cultural, and political ties, aids in avoiding social conflicts, and contributes to the overall reduction of poverty.

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