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Q6(b)

What is sustainable development? How can sustainability be achieved in India where livelihood needs conflict with environmental protection?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Challenges of Social Transformation

Challenges of Social Transformation: Crisis of development: displacement, environmental problems and sustainability; Poverty, deprivation and inequalities; Violence against women; Caste conflicts; Ethnic conflicts, communalism, religious revivalism; Illiteracy and disparities in education.

Core demand of the question

- Define sustainable development (Brundtland and Indian use)
- **Show the livelihood-environment conflict with Indian cases:** forests, coasts, cities, Green Revolution
- **Explain how sustainability can be approached:** rights, FRA, livelihoods, technology, and democratic planning
- Do not pretend there is no conflict

Revision summary

Sustainable development meets needs now without wrecking future needs and requires equity, not only green technology.

In India, forest, mine, Green Revolution and coastal conflicts show livelihood versus protection as class conflict.

Guha and Gadgil's ecosystem people versus omnivores is a usable map.

FRA, PESA and Gram Sabha consent are tools to join conservation with rights.

Costs should shift toward high consumption and corporate externalities, not only toward the poor.

Introduction

Sustainable development, in the Brundtland sense, meets present needs without destroying the ability of future generations to meet theirs. In India the same phrase is used in NITI documents and in protest. The hard part is that **today's livelihood**-fuelwood, fish, factory jobs, paddy-often **is** the pressure on soil, forest, air and water. Sociology treats that as a conflict of classes and regions, not as a misunderstanding that a slogan can dissolve.

Body

What sustainability means here

It is not only carbon accounting. It includes **livelihood security, equity, and ecological limits**. **A. R. Desai** would ask who owns the resource. **Ramachandra Guha** and **Madhav Gadgil distinguished omnivores and ecosystem people: urban-industrial India consumes what forest and coastal communities inhabit. Chipko, Narmada, and later**

Niyamgiri made that distinction political.

Where livelihood conflicts with protection

Forest dwellers need NTFP, shifting cultivation or grazing; the Forest Department and tiger reserves need exclusion. Miners and the treasury need bauxite and coal; Dongria Kondh and Hasdeo Arand communities need the hill. Green Revolution Punjab needs water and fertiliser; downstream and future soils pay. Coastal fishers need the sea; ports and SEZs need the same shore. Urban poor need cheap housing; wetlands that flood-buffer the city get built on. A blanket ban without alternatives is conservation against the poor. Unregulated extraction is livelihood for contractors and loss for the next generation of the same poor.

How sustainability can be approached

- **First**, rights-based access: the **Forest Rights Act, 2006**, PESA, and community forest management, so protection is not alienation. Second, **livelihood substitution that people accept**: MNREGA on local ecology, non-timber enterprises, fisheries co-management, not only tourist photography. Third, **technology and agronomy** that cut poison and water waste-but these fail if prices and MSP keep pushing monoculture. Fourth, **urban sustainability** as housing and public transport for labour, not only solar rooftops on gated colonies. Fifth, **democratic planning**: Gram Sabha consent, social impact under land-acquisition law, and the right to say no, as in **Niyamgiri**'s Gram Sabhas.

Sustainability in a poor, unequal country is a **bargain among classes mediated by the state**. It cannot be a museum forest beside hungry villages, and it cannot be growth that treats air and groundwater as free. The 2020-21 farmers' movement, Chipko's memory, and FRA struggles are parts of that bargain. Education (NEP's environmental aims) and women's groups in Chipko-type mobilisations matter because women often carry the daily fuel-and-water load.

Urban middle-class environmentalism (clean air, lakes, plastic bans) can conflict with waste-picker and street-vendor livelihoods. That is the same trilogy in the city: development as a world-class aesthetic, environment as amenity, and the identity of informal workers who live from the discarded city. A sociological sustainability answer must keep that urban conflict beside Chipko and **Niyamgiri**, or it will sound like a ministry pamphlet.

There will remain conflict. The sociological task is to **shift costs upward**-to luxury consumption, corporate externalities, and wasteful public projects-rather than to Adivasi and slum livelihoods.

Flow diagram

Present livelihoods -> Conflict
 Ecological limits -> Conflict
 FRA PESA consent PESA consent -> Sustainable path
 Fair alternatives -> Sustainable path
 Conflict -> Sustainable path

Conclusion

Sustainable development is development within ecological limits and across generations. In India it collides with livelihoods because the poor live inside the resources that the powerful want to fence or extract. FRA, democratic consent, and fair alternatives are the practical path. A pure ban and a pure extractive growth both fail the definition.

Facts & figures

Brundtland 1987

Classic definition of sustainable development as intergenerational need-meeting.

FRA 2006

Forest rights as a legal attempt to align livelihood and conservation.

Niyamgiri

Gram Sabhas rejected bauxite mining; a case of tribal livelihood, sacred hill and development conflict.

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