

## RAWLS' THEORY OF JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

**Suchitra Devi**

*Assistant Professor*

*Department of Political Science*

*ABV Govt. Degree College, Sunni*

*Email: suchitrahpu@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

*Sustainable development is a significant concept in the present time. It simultaneously encourages environmental protection, social equality, and economic development, thus creating resilience and stability in communities. The objective of this study is to examine Rawls' perspective on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development. Rawls considered economic development to be a means rather than an end. Rawls argues that it is important to prioritize the sustainable utilization of natural resources and to consider intergenerational justice as a significant component of sustainable development. The basic structure plays a crucial role in attaining sustainability. Preserving natural resources is imperative to safeguard the welfare of future generations.*

### **Keywords**

*Difference Principle, Sustainability, Basic Structure, Intergenerational Justice, Original Position.*

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Sustainable development is the endeavor to achieve economic development, social equity, and environmental preservation to secure a more promising future for everyone. In 1987, a report on sustainable development was published. This report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, p.43). Sustainable development promotes development that is guided by principles of justice for both current and future generations, with a focus on protecting the environment. The issue of time allocation, namely between the present and future generations, is a key focus in discussions on sustainable development. Intergenerational equity, as understood by economists, refers to the consideration of the preferences and choices of future generations who have not yet been born. Sustainable development promotes the threefold objective of achieving the necessary success to significantly improve living standards. Three components of sustainability contribute to the threefold objective of preserving the multifaceted potential of goals. The first component focuses on economic factors and aims to maximize overall well-being. Its objective is to optimize the allocation of resources in a way that mitigates the negative impacts of industrial and agricultural production. The second component pertains to the environment, which restricts the overconsumption of limited resources and preserves the functioning of the atmosphere and biodiversity. The third component is social, which encompasses the concept of distributional equality to preserve a sufficient social structure (Harries, 2000, pp.5-6). Sustainability encompasses the enhancement of basic necessities such as material well-being, food, income, educational services, water, and sanitation at the local level. Alleviating poverty by safeguarding sustainable livelihoods that minimize the depletion of resources. Hence, sustainable development centers around the preservation of the environment, advancement of the economy, and ensuring social fairness.

### **John Rawls' Perspective on Sustainable Development**

John Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971) provides a methodical critique of the utilitarian philosophy that has predominantly shaped the discourse on natural resource utilization and environmental consequences. The difference principle has garnered significant attention from individuals with a particular interest in natural resources and the environment. The concept has been utilized throughout different periods to guarantee that future generations have a sufficient supply of natural resources and a habitable environment. According to this argument, the individual's right to exploit the environment is not as absolute as the ongoing societal requirement to maintain a sufficient material standard of living and a

satisfactory quality of the biophysical environment. Justifying inequality between generations in terms of resources and the environment is possible if it can be demonstrated that all generations benefit from this inequality (Penn, 1990, p.227). Rawls' fundamental argument for justice is around the concept of the basic structure, which guarantees long-term viability. Sustainable development entails the preservation of natural resources for the benefit of humanity. Conservation of natural resources is a matter of fairness, demonstrated via the safeguarding of the environment. Rawls establishes principles governing the benefits that arise from social cooperation. Sustainable development reduces the likelihood of natural disasters and promotes the establishment of a basic structure. Rawls contends that the presence of justice in the basic structure of society guarantees the possibility of sustainability. This is achieved by upholding essential rights and responsibilities, which are necessary for establishing a just basic structure. The probability of natural disasters increases as a result of the thoughtless consumption of limited natural resources (Singh, 2019, p.59). There is a need for proper utilization of natural resources and Rawls' basic structure can promote sustainable development by prioritizing equitable resource distribution and long-term well-being. Rawls highlights the significance of the basic structure in guaranteeing long-term viability.

Rawls' Theory of Justice is valuable for constructing a framework for sustainable development due to two distinct reasons, apart from his significant impact on political theory overall and on conceptions of intergenerational equity specifically. According to Rawls, it is not necessary for justice to constantly enhance the material standard of living for the least advantaged. However, justice does demand a minimum level of income or wealth in society. Secondly, the utilization of Rawls' theory of justice serves as a shared objective for both economic progress and environmental preservation: guaranteeing that individuals from both present and future generations possess the essential resources to cultivate and exercise their two fundamental moral abilities, namely a sense of justice and the ability to formulate and pursue their own goals or conception of a fulfilling life. Given that all individuals who are free and equal possess these two moral abilities, a Rawlsian perspective on intergenerational justice offers a definition of the "needs" of future generations that extends beyond mere survival. This approach avoids the need to make assumptions about the values or preferences of future generations (Henderson, 2011, pp. 6-7).

Rawls also addresses the concept of intergenerational justice. Rawls contended that the core principles in the concept of justice as fairness are the notions of society as an equitable system of cooperation that endures across generations, citizens as individuals who are both free and equal, and a well-organized society

that is governed by a political understanding of justice (Lehning, 2009, p. 107). Rawls examines the concept of sustainability while discussing the methods by which fair institutions should be preserved over time. Rawls's ultimate goal is to establish a "steady-state phase" in which just institutions are maintained over generations. To do this, he suggests implementing a notion of equitable savings, which entails an agreement across generations to bear their proportionate responsibility in achieving and maintaining a fair society. Intergenerational duties are evaluated based on a current understanding of the original position in the context of time. Rawls' principle of just savings restricts the difference principle. It prohibits a generation from distributing primary goods in a manner that would maximize the primary goods of the current least well-off individuals at the expense of future least well-off individuals. The difference principle establishes the criteria for fair distribution of resources within a single generation, whereas the just savings concept can be employed across generations to ensure the preservation of fair institutions in the future (Fritz & Cox, 2018, p.3).

Sustainable development emerged as a response to the growing awareness of environmental issues, offering a solution to balance development with sustainability. The purpose of its deals is to facilitate the ongoing progress of development, with an emphasis on meeting the basic requirements of human beings. It does not solely prioritize economic growth, which is now seen as a means to achieve sustainable development (Farias, 2020, p.38). The notion of equitable justice in relation to sustainable development is considered to be highly promising, primarily because ensuring a balanced environment is a fundamental entitlement for all individuals. Additionally, the responsibility of safeguarding the environment is a collective duty that rests upon the entire population. (Farias, 2020, p. 46). Rawls examines the concept of intergenerational justice in his analysis of the original position. According to Rawls, individuals in the original position lack knowledge regarding their generational affiliation. These more extensive limitations on knowledge are suitable partly because issues of social fairness develop both across generations and within them. For instance, the issue at hand pertains to determining the optimal rate of capital preservation and the sustainable management of natural resources and the environment. Additionally, there is the theoretical consideration of implementing a rational genetic strategy. In such instances, it is imperative for the parties involved to be aware of the circumstances that have placed them in opposition, to effectively uphold the concept of the initial position. Individuals must select ideals that they are willing to accept the outcomes of, regardless of the specific generation they end up being a part of. The ideal concept, therefore, is one that all

generations, including the current one, would like previous generations to have adhered to, regardless of how far in the past. Given the lack of knowledge about their position in relation to other generations, it can be inferred that all subsequent generations, including the current one, are expected to come after it. By adopting this approach, we establish a guiding principle that justifies our obligations towards future generations. It allows us to make valid criticisms of those who came before us and have reasonable expectations of those who will come after us (Rawls, 2001, p.160). Rawls' view of justice is founded on a procedural theory and the idea of justice as fairness. In his theory of justice, Rawls formulates concepts that center upon the difference principle, which prioritizes the least advantaged segment of society. Currently, numerous countries are experiencing poverty as a result of the depletion of their natural resources.

According to Rawls "the difference principle expresses a conception of reciprocity. It is a principle of mutual benefit. We have seen that, at least when chain connection holds, each representative man can accept the basic structure as designed to advance his interests. The social order can be justified to everyone, and in particular to those who are least favored, and in this sense, it is egalitarian" (Rawls,1972, pp.102-103).

The proper anticipation for applying the difference principle is the long-term prospects of the least advantaged individuals stretching across future generations. Every generation has the responsibility to not only safeguard the achievements of culture and civilization, and uphold the fair systems that have been created, but also to set away an appropriate amount of actual capital accumulation during each historical period (Rawls, 1972, p.285). All generations are effectively represented in the original position, as the same principle would consistently be selected. An optimal democratic decision will be achieved, one that is equitably balanced to accommodate the demands of every generation and so fulfills the principle that matters affecting everyone are of interest to everyone (Rawls, 1972, p.288).

To maintain the current understanding of the original position, the issue of savings must be addressed through limits that apply to citizens as contemporaries. Given that society is intended to function as a just and cooperative structure across different generations over some time, it is necessary to have a governing principle that guides the act of saving. It is important to avoid envisioning a theoretical and non-historical direct agreement among all generations. Instead, we might state that the parties should agree to a concept that ensures they desire all past generations to have adhered to it. Individuals must consider the proportion of the social product

they are willing to save at each level of income as society progresses, assuming that all preceding generations have adhered to the same plan (Rawls, 2001, p.160). Rawls's primary objective is to establish institutions that facilitate the attainment of sustainable development. The state should collaborate to foster a conducive and transparent global economic framework that would result in economic growth and sustainable development in all nations, to effectively tackle the issues of environmental deterioration. According to Rawls, the idea of just saving can be seen as an agreement between different generations to each contribute their fair portion towards achieving and maintaining a fair society (Rawls, 1972, p.289). Individuals across all generations have responsibilities and commitments towards each other, similar to how people of the same age group do. The current generation is not free to act according to its own desires, but is instead constrained by the principles that would be selected in the hypothetical scenario of the original position, to establish fairness among individuals at different points in time. Furthermore, it is inherent for men to have a moral obligation to support and advance fair systems, and to do this, the progress of society must reach a specific threshold (Rawls, 1972, p. 293).

Rawls examines how his theory addresses the issue of future generations, which has become a recurring topic since the publication of "A Theory of Justice." The topic of intergenerational justice pertains to how present generations make decisions on behalf of future generations. Each successive generation has the responsibility to not only safeguard the advantages provided by the various principles for its present members, but also to ensure that future generations receive comparable treatment. Rawls' contractual approach examines the problem by considering the original situation and requires the parties to make decisions based on a suitable principle of just savings. The issue emerges when the parties are aware of their generational affiliation, regardless of their knowledge of the prevailing societal characteristics of their generation, such as whether it is predominantly agricultural or industrial. The solution offered by Rawls, under these constraints, is predicated on two assumptions: (i) that the parties represent familial lineages, which are at least concerned about the welfare of their immediate descendants; (ii) that the parties would consider the interests of past generations. However, it is difficult to determine the exact boundaries of the just savings concept due to its reliance on certain contextual factors throughout the agreement. However, it is important to ensure a specific level of coherence between the concepts of justice and intergenerational connections (Maffetone, 2010, pp.44-45). Rawls primarily emphasizes the idea of justice as fairness. The notion of sustainable

development can be seen as a “just savings principle” in the Rawlsian sense, in many ways. Sustainable development entails not only the preservation of cultural and civilizational achievements by each generation, but also the avoidance of harm to the natural systems that sustain life on Earth and the preservation of ecological conditions for life. The rationale for doing so aligns with the justification for supporting the principle of just saving: to honor, establish, and sustain equitable institutions and all the necessary conditions for enabling just institutions and the equitable value of freedom (Langhelle,2000, p.307).

Rawls’ theory of just saving does not require each generation to save the exact amount that previous generations saved, but rather the amount that they would rationally choose to preserve. Rawls may have been influenced by the facts of our current lack of savings and our reliance on borrowing from the future when he revised his initial criterion for just savings in the first edition of *A Theory of Justice*. In attempting to address the idea of just savings, he posited that the individuals in the original position would possess awareness of their emotional connections to their offspring and descendants, and therefore would be motivated to allocate a fair portion of their savings for their benefit (Freeman,2007, p. 139). Thus, Rawls has emphasized the significance of intergenerational justice and fairness. His framework provides a basis for discussing intergenerational justice within the broader context of his theory of justice.

### **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that Rawls’ perspective on sustainable development is significant. The ideals of justice, fairness, and equity offer a good foundation for comprehending how a fair society should address environmental challenges and manage resources. Rawls’ prioritization of safeguarding the welfare of the least advantaged persons in society and his concentration on promoting equal opportunities are in line with the objectives of sustainable development. Rawls’ theory of justice provides vital insights into how communities might pursue sustainable development by giving priority to fairness, intergenerational equity, and the preservation of resources for future generations. By integrating Rawlsian concepts into policy formulation and decision-making procedures, society can strive toward a more equitable and enduring future.

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