



# Is the Concept of Sustainable Development a Contemporary Ideology?

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*Abstract: The principles and values of Sustainable development concept, such as long-term development, exceeding the selfish interests for the sake of others, fair and ethical behavior, are pronounced in increasing frequency with such a conviction and inspiration, that unintentionally emerges the question, whether the concept itself is turning into panacea or self-deception. This article attempts to contribute to better understanding what the concept of Sustainable development is by trying to show in the concept implementation the qualities of ideological understanding of reality.*

*Key words: Ideology, belief, sustainable development, corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainable consumption.*

## 1 Introduction

Ideology is comprehensive perception of life and reality based on accepted values, scientific knowledge and philosophical doctrine explaining how world, society and etc. are organized, teaching how to behave, to perfect oneself and contribute to social development as well. The concept of Sustainable development offers the values, scientific and philosophical substantiation of actions to contribute in self- and social development, to fulfill own purposes keeping care about the others. Do they both resemble?

In the first part of the article we consider what is ideology as a belief, how it may turn into self-deception. The second part of the paper is devoted to the search for conformity of the concept of Sustainable development with the criteria of ideology. In the third part the critical view to the ideology of Sustainable development on its way to self-deception is expressed.

## 2 Ideology as a kind of belief based on higher values

There is no definition of ideology widely recognized as the one to be applied. In accordance with one's purpose ideology is colored with bright or dark tints. Moreover, looking through the definitions what ideology is<sup>1</sup>, one can probably come to the conclusion, that it has been understood:

1. Positively: as a science about ideas (Destutt de Tracy), as a social determination of knowledge (K. Mannheim),
2. Neutrally: a theoretical expression of ideas and beliefs (K. Marx. Despite the thinker admitted that ideology is a "false consciousness", he considered that to be temporary and even necessary just until objective knowledge is obtained), set of beliefs motivated by social interests (Terry Eagleton),
3. Negatively: as a political "weapon" (H. Arendt), source of legitimacy of institutions and the justification for the authority (George Gabot Lodge), self-deception (K. Jaspers).

Indeed, ideology is inevitable outcome of human mind activity in attempt to comprehend the world, the meaning of life, the purposes to be achieved, the principles of making decisions and evaluations. It is something that in the German language called *Weltanschauung*, in Russian - *Мировоззрение* (*Mirovozzrenie*), in Hungarian - *Világnézet*, and can be literally translated as an outlook, a view to the world as a whole and to one's life in particular. From this perspective ideology is one of the most important qualities of a person in attempt to define the framework in which his/her life can be structured and organized.

As long as ideology gives a stable framework, structuring decision-making, it is easier treated as something negative. Indeed, ideology is false consciousness as it is always dealing with something untouchable, incomprehensible and elusive, such as values and ideas. It may easily turn into self-deception, when being stiff and motionless, when being used as a tool of authority justification. At the same time, ideology may keep a positive attitude to life, when it is not fixed, but always developed in harmony with getting new experience, knowledge, feeling of reality.

Obviously, ideology is not a knowledge, but belief, i.e. the acceptance without proof that something is true. According to Elias L. Khalil, "ideology is a set of principles dressed-up as rules..."<sup>2</sup>. Principles are distinguished by him in the following way: "Principles are valued goals like economic growth, equality, justice, national

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- 1 Eagleton Terry (1943): Ideology: an introduction, Maslova E.A. (2011): Evolution of the Concept of Ideology in Political Theory - Vestnik of Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod, No 6 (1), p. 315-319, Shelby Tommie (2003): Ideology, racism and critical social theory - The Philosophical Forum, Volume XXXIV, No. 2, Summer 2003, John T. Jost (2006): The End of the End of Ideology - American Psychologist, Vol. 61, No 7, p. 651.,
  - 2 Elias L. Khalil (1989): Principles, rules and ideology - Forum for Social Economics, Spring/Fall, Volume 19, Issue 1, p. 44

ascendancy, financial or literary success, and freedom... principles of a human community could find their expressions in mythologies, religious doctrines, and constitutions. This does not deny that these traditions may contain as well systems of rules. They are, however, essentially about principles"<sup>3</sup>. Principles mentioned by Elias L. Khalil are the ideas, values to believe in. In our understanding, we apply further in the article, ideology is a kind of irreligious belief, the most developed one unlike belief-as-trust, belief-as-opinion, belief-as-aspiration<sup>4</sup>:

- belief as trust (blind acceptance based on emotions and desire to believe in anything), belief as opinion (this type of belief caused by not only desire to believe, but also by one's experience, critical thinking and necessity to make a decision in the conditions of uncertainty), belief as aspiration (this kind of belief is always caused by a purpose, therefore in addition to desire and critical thinking it is based on will, volition to achieve the particular goal),

- belief as ideology (it is a comprehensive perception of life and reality based on accepted values, scientific knowledge, philosophical doctrine explaining how world, society and etc. are organized, teaching how to behave, to perfect oneself and contribute to social development as well. Belief-as-ideology requires emotional, critical, volitional attitudes, and moreover readiness, willingness to self-sacrifice for the sake of the purpose considered to be important. Belief-as-ideology is always about supreme purposes exceeding the selfish goals of one's private life. Belief-as-ideology has to be understood neutrally as only a temporary outlook, which is to be changed in harmony with the personal development.

Having defined what we call to be ideology is in the framework of this article, we need to find the criteria to be fulfilled in attempt to call a concept, doctrine, set of ideas and etc. to be ideology. There are at least five criteria of ideology met in most of the definitions offered in scientific literature, they are:

1. Ideology concerns ideas, principles, values,
2. Ideology has a rational character, contains critical thinking, knowledge, rules to follow,
3. Ideology is connected with acceptance of a paradigm, way of understanding the world and society as a whole and oneself as its member, it often connects with higher purposes, exceeding the bounds of private ones,
4. Ideology is reflected in human activities which are to correspond the ideological teaching,
5. Ideology may easily become a self-deception as it fixes, frames the ideas preventing them from changes.

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3 Elias L. Khalil (1989): Principles, rules and ideology - Forum for Social Economics, Spring/Fall, Volume 19, Issue 1, p. 44

4 for more details see: Platonova Y.A (2010): Belief and its importance in comprehension the way of life. Dissertation

Below we make the attempt to answer the question, if Sustainable development concept embodied in CSR-policies may be called a contemporary ideology.

### **3 The concept of Sustainable development as a kind of ideology**

#### **3.1 The concept of Sustainable development evolution**

The concept of Sustainable development, as well as the notion “ideology”, has been defined in many ways. But the most frequently quoted definition is that, taken from the Brundtland Report released by The United Nations in 1987: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs”<sup>5</sup>.

The understanding of Sustainable development has appeared not at once. The concept is considered to come to existence in its initial form in 1962, when Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* was published. The book showed the damage to animal species and human health resulting from the usage of agricultural pesticides. In such a way first the environmental issues came to the point of the close look and even implementation in the legal acts (National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act have been issued in 1969 and in 1973, respectively, in USA). Later, after the International Debt crisis of 1982, the question how to achieve economic growth in a long-term perspective without damaging the environment and society has emerged in the open discussion: in 1984 Third World Network was founded as the activist voice of the South on issues of economics, development and environment, in 1987 OECD Development Advisory Committee created guidelines for environment and development in bilateral aid policies, the Brundtland Report popularized the term “sustainable development”, combined environmental, economical, social and cultural aspects of global policies. After the concept itself had been settled, the question concerning the principles of the concept implementation was put to the agenda. Initially the government initiatives played the main role in developing and implementing the concept of Sustainable development. But after 1990 business joined the state in spreading the ideas of sustainable development (in 1990 The Business Council of Sustainable Development published “Changing Course”, establishing the business interest in promoting sustainable development, in 1994 the standard ISO 14000 has been adapted, in 1999 the Dow Jones Sustainability Index has been launched, in 2002 Global Reporting Initiative released guidelines for

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5 Our common future (1987): Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. United Nations

reporting on the economic, environmental and social dimensions of business activities). The World food, fuel and financial crises of 2008 influenced national governments to show the precise attention to the Green economy ideas and environmental actions. In 2009 G20 nations provided guidance for a 21st century global, sustainable and balanced economy. Leaders called for phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, and seek measures that will lead to sustainable consumption, while providing targeted support for the poorest people<sup>6</sup>. In such a way the baton of sustainable development principles implementation is step by step being passed by states not only to business players, but to people, who are customers, consumers, as well.

Coming back to the question, if the concept of Sustainable development is a kind of ideology, we confront what we got about the concept with the criteria of ideology considered above:

1. The concept of Sustainable development definitely concerns ideas, principles, values. The main values of the concept are: economic prosperity, environmental quality and social balance (known also as triple bottom line).
2. Sustainable development as a concept is quite rational: it is based on critical thinking, knowledge, scientific conclusions. The concept of “planetary boundaries” introduced by scientists in 2009, Nobel Prize in economics for the work on the economic governance of the commons are just the glaring examples of that.
3. The concept of Sustainable development is connected with acceptance of a paradigm, way of understanding the world and society as a whole and oneself as its member, it is often connected with higher purposes, exceeding the bounds of private ones. “All definitions of sustainable development require that we see the world as a system—a system that connects space; and a system that connects time, - The International Institute of Sustainable Development publishes on its web-page. - The concept of sustainable development is rooted in this sort of systems thinking. It helps us understand ourselves and our world. The problems we face are complex and serious—and we can't address them in the same way we created them”<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the concept itself is even called to be future-oriented, focused on the living conditions not only present, but the following generations.

Thus, the concept of Sustainable development meets at least three criteria to be called the contemporary ideology. Further in the article we consider whether Sustainable development is reflected in human activities, then we collect the opinions about Sustainable development if it is or may become a self-deception, illusion for the believers in stable economic progress, fair society, harmony with nature, leading to the bright future.

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6 The detailed information is available in Sustainable Development Timeline issued by The International Institute of Sustainable Development, [www.iisd.org](http://www.iisd.org)

7 What is Sustainable Development? Environmental, economic and social well-being for today and tomorrow. Web-site of The International Institute of Sustainable Development (IISD), <http://www.iisd.org/sd/>

### 3.2 CSR: do companies accept the concept of Sustainable development?

To clarify whether the concept of Sustainable development is being practically implemented, first we need to define, who are the main actors, promoting the principles of the concept. Mentioned above activities, taken from the timetable of the concept of Sustainable development, show the role of states in spreading the principles and ideas. But a state is obviously not a single actor and not the last unit of the chain of the concept's principles implementation. Those who are aiming at the economic success, being at the same time the members of society, had been considered as responsible for social development even before the concept of Sustainable development came to existence. The notion "Social responsibility" and later "Corporate social responsibility" reflect this understanding (from a big variety of definitions for the article we chose those, which clearly show the principles of Sustainable development taking up above)<sup>8</sup>:

1953: "It (social responsibility) refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society"<sup>9</sup>. 1966: "Social responsibility, therefore, refers to a person's obligation to consider the effects of his decisions and actions on the whole social system. In so doing, they (businessmen) look beyond their firm's narrow economic and technical interests"<sup>10</sup>. 1975: "Employment of minority groups, reduction in pollution, greater participation in programs to improve the community, improved medical care, improved industrial health and safety—these and other programs designed to improve the quality of life are covered by the broad umbrella of social responsibility"<sup>11</sup>. 1980: "Corporate social responsibility is the notion that corporations have an obligation to constituent groups in society other than stockholders and beyond that prescribed by law and union contract"<sup>12</sup>. 1991: "The CSR firm should strive to make a profit, obey the law, be ethical, and be a good corporate citizen"<sup>13</sup>.

It is worth to note, that the both notions, CSR and Sustainable development, were being evolved by theorists in parallel since 60s till the late 80s. Both lines of the notions evolution depicted the search of the way to formalize the ideas, principles, values (common for both: long-term development, exceeding the selfish interests for the sake of others, fair and ethical behavior). As long as the both notions became largely accepted and even applied in the same context, since the end of 90s the question

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8 Carroll Archie B. (1999): Corporate social responsibility: evolution of a definitional construct - *Business & Society*, vol. 38, No 3

9 Bowen, H.R.(1953): *Social responsibilities of the businessman*. New York, p.6

10 Davis, K., & Blomstrom, R. L. (1966): *Business and its environment*. New York, p.12

11 Backman, J. (Ed.). (1975): *Social responsibility and accountability*. New York: New York University Press, p. 2

12 Jones, T. M. (1980, Spring). Corporate social responsibility revisited, redefined. *California Management Review*, p. 59

13 Carroll, A. B. (1991, July/August). The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders. *Business Horizons*, 34, p. 43.

concerning implementation of the promoted principles by the companies is on the agenda.

Thus, on the level of theoretical discussions companies are apparently those who are expected to voluntarily accept the principles of the Sustainability development concept. At the same time, the positive tendency of CSR-activities is also visible, what is corroborated by the statistics: 1. ISO 14001:2004, which gives the requirements for environmental management systems, retains its global relevance for organizations wishing to operate in an environmentally sustainable manner. Up to the end of December 2011, at least 267 457 ISO 14001:2004 certificates had been issued, a growth of 6 % (+15 909), in 158 countries, two more than in the previous year<sup>14</sup>. 2. Looking at the statistics of companies actively dealing with Dow Jones Sustainability Indices (the number of companies completing questionnaires), one can recognize the number of active participants growth: 500 companies in 2002, 522 – in 2005, 558 – in 2008, 790 – in 2012<sup>15</sup>. 3. KPMG's International Corporate Responsibility Survey shows continuous growth since 1999 in GRI reporting. The most significant growth is noticeable at the very beginning of GRI initiatives (300% in 2000, 177% in 2001) and in the year the financial crisis (58% in 2008)<sup>16</sup>.

### **3.3 Sustainable consumption or consumers as the believers in sustainable development**

Not only states and companies are considered to be promoters of the sustainable development principles. Inasmuch as the customers, clients, consumers are those who influence the supply in the free-market economy, they are the actors of the concept of Sustainable development ideas implementation as well. In market economy they are expected to determine consumption patterns, including demand for so called green-products.

The sustainable consumption challenge emerged as a key issue in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. The respective definition has been offered at the Symposium on Sustainable Consumption: "the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations."<sup>17</sup> In the given definition we meet again the principles and values expressed by the concept of Sustainable development:

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14 The ISO Survey of Management System Standard Certifications – 2011, <http://www.iso.org/iso/news.htm?refid=Ref1686>

15 Dow Jones Sustainability Indices, <http://www.sustainability-indices.com/review/annual-review-history.jsp>

16 GRI Sustainability Reporting Statistics, 2011, <https://www.globalreporting.org/resource/library/GRI-Reporting-Trends-2011.pdf>

17 UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), Symposium on Sustainable Consumption, Oslo, 1994

long-term development, exceeding the selfish interests for the sake of others, fair and ethical behavior.

In spite of consumer willingness often does not translate into sustainable consumer behavior because of a variety of factors – such as availability, affordability, convenience, product performance, conflicting priorities, skepticism and force of habit<sup>18</sup>, studies are showing that they are concerned about environmental, social and economic issues, and increasingly willing to act on those concerns. At present time consumers are less trusting of brands than in the past, and increasingly believe that they have the power to significantly influence how responsibly a company behaves<sup>19</sup>. In periodical publications one may often meet the examples of sales growth of sustainability-oriented products, as hybrid, plug-in hybrid or electric cars, organic food, energy- and water-conserving goods and etc. Such a tendency shows that customers are step by step inclining to sustainable consumption.

#### **4 Whether the concept of Sustainable development is a self-deception**

Having briefly touched on the subjects of CSR and Sustainable consumption, which are, in our understanding, the concepts of practical implementation of the Sustainable development principles by companies and their customers, we may conclude, that they (the principles) are presented in human activities. The latter means that the fourth criterion of ideology is also met by the concept of Sustainable development, like the other three taken up above. The only one criterion is left to be reviewed: whether the concept of Sustainable development is able to fix, frame the ideas preventing them from changes, becoming in such a way self-deception.

It is noticeable, that in response to such an influential popularization of CSR and Sustainability the counteraction has emerged: “Corporate social responsibility is a contradiction in terms. Companies are legally bound to maximise profits to shareholders. This duty to make money above all other considerations means that corporations can only be 'socially responsible' if they are being insincere. Any doubtful social benefits from CSR are outweighed by the losses to society in other areas. CSR is an effective strategy for: bolstering a company's public image; avoiding regulation; gaining legitimacy and access to markets and decision makers; and shifting the ground towards privatisation of public functions”<sup>20</sup>. “The idea that companies have a responsibility to act in the public interest and will profit from doing so is fundamentally

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18 Sustainable Consumption facts and trends. World Business Council for sustainable development,

19 GlobeScan, CSR survey, 2007

20 Corporate Watch, Corporate Structures Programme, 2006. [www.corporatewatch.org](http://www.corporatewatch.org)



flawed. It's an illusion and a potentially dangerous one"<sup>21</sup>. "Like a vitamin regimen that exceeds recommended daily amounts, corporate social responsibility (CSR)—once seen as a healthy thing in small doses—now poses a toxic threat to American business... if the latest and most radical wave of supposedly "voluntary" CSR standards, principles, and strategies is fully embraced by the corporate world, it will unleash additional efforts by CSR proponents (special-interest NGOs and intrusive government bureaucrats) to redefine the very purpose of business and lash private companies to ever greater burdens and constraints"<sup>22</sup>. Such a counteraction shows the doubts about adaptability of the Sustainable development principles in business, consequently, the doubts about veracity of CSR. Moreover, there is the uncertainty regarding the Sustainability principles capability to determine customers' choice: "in general, the environmentally friendly product attribute can influence buying decisions only to a small extent – it can play role only if price, cover and binding are the same"<sup>23</sup>.

Thus, the fact, that the principles of Sustainable development are reflected in actions, does not mean, that the concept itself is widely shared and believed. At first sight it is obviously a negative result of the concept implementation. But in terms of accepted under this article understanding of ideology, the kept doubts, the existing counteraction are the positive signs, revealing that the concept of Sustainable development is still evolving, being forced by "non-believers".

## Conclusion

Belief is a part of human nature as a reaction to uncertainty and a result of expectations. Individual rests upon beliefs in day-to-day activity and even in business practices<sup>24</sup>. Belief may be rather emotional, or based on critical thinking, influenced by desires and volitions and even embodied in the complex outlook on reality. Certainly belief-as-ideology pretends to be a veritable, true understanding of the world, but obviously it is not always so. And in this case ideology turns into self-deception.

In the article the five criteria of ideology are defined and applied to answer the question, whether the concept of Sustainable development is a kind of contemporary ideology possibly leading to self-deception. As soon as the states have to be (or got used to be) active in pursuing environmental policies, companies have to be (or got used to be) socially responsible proving their CSR activities with their social reports and auditing practices, citizens are taught how to make a "green" choice for benefit of the whole

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- 21 Karnani Aneel (2010, August 23): The case against corporate social responsibility - The Wall Street Journal
  - 22 Roberts James M., Markley Andrew W. (2012): Why the U.S. should oppose international Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) mandates - Backgrounder, No. 2685
  - 23 Majlath Melinda (2009): Evaluation of environmentally friendly Product Attribute – Results of an empirical Research – in Proceedings of 7th International Conference on Management, Enterprise and Benchmarking, Budapest, p. 210
  - 24 Ermakov S.A., Ermakova E.V. (2013): Business philosophy in entrepreneurship culture-Historical, Philosophical, Political and Law Sciences, Culturology and Study of Art. Issues of Theory and Practice, No 6 (32), p.62-64

planet and everybody believes that such a strategy, shared by all of the members of society, leads to blessing and prosperity, the concept of Sustainable development bears a strong resemblance to ideology showing the best correlation with the all five criteria. The concept concerns values and principles to believe in, being rational it contains knowledge, it shows the system how the world is organized and teaches how to behave exceeding own selfish purposes to maintain the planet, societies, cultures, it is reflected in actions, in business practices and consumption preferences, and finally it is on the way to be institutionalised, i.e. to be framed with the rules, to be fixed in widely accepted behavioral patterns. The latter raises discussions and disputes concerning the point whether implementation of the concept principles has to be voluntary or obligatory, whether it has to be toughly institutionalised.

History showed many examples of consequences of mass beliefs creation and control. It does not mean that ideology is always a political “weapon”. According to preferable for us neutral understanding of ideology as a set of beliefs motivated by social interests (Terry Eagleton), society needs values shared by its members to be stable and harmonious, individuals need beliefs and principles to be consistent in their decision-making. Ideology is valuable, when it is changeable in accordance with common values freely shared by the members of society and it is frightening, when propagated by means of forcible institutionalization without taking into consideration the readiness of people to accept it as their own. It makes sense to cautiously watch the process of institutionalization to notice on time, when the concept of Sustainable development loses its free search for better life and turns into fixed self-deception.

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The concept of sustainable development has the potential to appeal to many stakeholders but also to be interpreted under a multitude of conflicting definitions. Ideas of sustainability and sustainable development have emerged over an extended period of human history and have evolved significantly during the process. Institutions for sustainable development have emerged relatively late in the story but have had a significant role in shaping the discourse. This essay briefly examines the emergence of the ideas and looks at a number of key developments that have influenced the evolving conception