

Environmental Sustainability as a Foundation for Inclusive and Sustainable Development

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Abstract: *Environmental sustainability has emerged as a fundamental condition for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Economic growth, poverty reduction, social well-being and environmental protection are increasingly interconnected, as ecological degradation can undermine livelihoods, health, food security, access to natural resources and the resilience of vulnerable populations. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize this interdependence by integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions within a universal development framework. However, persistent climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, resource depletion and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption continue to threaten development gains. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has emphasized that climate impacts, poverty and inequality can reinforce one another, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities and constraining opportunities for sustainable development (IPCC, 2022). Similarly, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2024) has highlighted the increasing pressure of resource extraction and the unequal distribution of environmental impacts. Against this background, the present conceptual article examines environmental sustainability as a foundation for inclusive and sustainable development. It discusses the relationship between environmental sustainability and poverty reduction, social equity, public health, sustainable livelihoods, economic resilience, gender equality and intergenerational justice. The article also identifies major challenges and proposes strategies based on green economic transformation, circular economy, renewable energy, sustainable resource management, environmental education, inclusive governance and climate-resilient development. The article argues that environmental sustainability should not be treated merely as an environmental policy objective but as a central development principle capable of supporting equitable prosperity and long-term human well-being.*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 30 July 2026

Received in revised form
10 August 2026

Accepted 15 August 2026

Citation: Mondal. P. & Kumar. P., (2026) "Environmental Sustainability as a Foundation for Inclusive and Sustainable Development", *Pen and Prosperity*, Vol. 3, Issue. 4, August 2026.

Keywords: *Environmental Sustainability, Inclusive Development, Sustainable Development, Climate Change, Social Equity, Green Economy, Sustainable Livelihoods, Circular Economy.*

Introduction: Development has traditionally been associated with economic growth, industrialization, infrastructure expansion and improvements in income and consumption. Although these processes have

contributed significantly to human well-being, development pursued without adequate consideration of ecological limits has generated serious environmental consequences. Climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, pollution, water scarcity and excessive extraction of natural resources increasingly threaten the foundations upon which economies and societies depend. Environmental sustainability has therefore moved from being a peripheral concern to becoming a central component of development policy.

The contemporary understanding of sustainable development emerged strongly from the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which emphasized the need to meet present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). This principle established an important connection between environmental protection, economic development and intergenerational responsibility. The 2030 Agenda subsequently strengthened this integrated approach by defining 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets covering economic, social and environmental dimensions of development. The United Nations emphasizes that these goals are integrated and indivisible and that sustainable development must balance economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental protection (United Nations, 2015).

Environmental sustainability is particularly important for inclusive development because vulnerable populations frequently depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods. Poor households, small-scale farmers, fishers, forest-dependent communities and informal workers may have limited economic capacity to cope with environmental shocks. Climate change can reduce agricultural productivity, damage infrastructure, increase food insecurity and create health risks, thereby reinforcing existing poverty and inequality. The IPCC concludes that climate change, development deficits and inequality can exacerbate one another and that vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by climate-related impacts (IPCC, 2022).

Objectives of the Study: The article has been developed with the following objectives:

1. To examine the concept and significance of environmental sustainability in contemporary development.
2. To analyse the relationship between environmental sustainability and inclusive development.
3. To examine the contribution of environmental sustainability to poverty reduction, livelihoods, health and social equity.
4. To identify major environmental and developmental challenges affecting sustainable and inclusive growth.
5. To suggest strategies for integrating environmental sustainability into inclusive development policies and practices.

Methodology: The present article adopts a conceptual and descriptive research approach based on secondary sources. Relevant literature was examined from academic books, research studies, international reports and policy documents relating to sustainable development, environmental sustainability, climate change, resource management, social inclusion and green economic transformation. Major institutional sources include the United Nations, UNEP, IPCC and World Bank. The analysis synthesizes existing conceptual and empirical evidence to develop an integrated understanding of how environmental sustainability can serve as a foundation for inclusive and sustainable development.

Conceptualizing Environmental Sustainability and Inclusive Development: Environmental sustainability refers to the responsible management and conservation of natural systems and resources so that ecological processes can continue to support human well-being over the long term (WCED, 1987; Daly, 1990; Costanza et al., 1997). It involves maintaining biodiversity, reducing pollution, conserving water and

land, controlling greenhouse-gas emissions, promoting renewable resources and ensuring that patterns of production and consumption remain within ecological limits (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). The concept is closely associated with the broader sustainability framework in which environmental integrity is considered inseparable from economic and social well-being (Daly, 1990; Costanza et al., 1997; Sachs, 2015). Since human economies and livelihoods depend fundamentally on natural capital and ecosystem services, environmental degradation can directly undermine health, livelihoods, food security and economic development (Daily, 1997; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; IPCC, 2022).

Inclusive development, in contrast, emphasizes the participation of all sections of society in economic and social progress and the equitable distribution of its benefits (Sen, 1999; World Bank, 2006). It seeks to reduce poverty, inequality and exclusion while ensuring access to essential services, livelihood opportunities, productive resources and decision-making processes (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2011; UNDP, 2020). Inclusive development therefore extends beyond economic growth by emphasizing equality of opportunity, human capabilities, social participation and empowerment (Sen, 1999; Stiglitz et al., 2010). The 2030 Agenda explicitly connects poverty eradication, inequality reduction, environmental protection and sustainable economic growth and commits governments to ensuring that no one is left behind (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs consequently recognize that social, economic and environmental objectives are interconnected and cannot be effectively addressed in isolation (United Nations, 2015; Sachs, 2015).

The two concepts are therefore mutually reinforcing. Environmental degradation can increase exclusion by disproportionately affecting people who possess fewer resources to adapt, particularly low-income and natural-resource-dependent communities (World Bank, 2006; IPCC, 2022). Climate change, ecosystem degradation and resource scarcity can further intensify existing socioeconomic inequalities and undermine development gains (IPCC, 2022; IPCC, 2023). Conversely, inclusive development can improve environmental outcomes when communities are provided with secure livelihoods, education, technology, social protection and opportunities to participate in environmental governance (Ostrom, 1990; UNDP, 2020). Environmental sustainability should therefore be understood not simply as an ecological objective but as an essential foundation for equitable and long-term human development (WCED, 1987; Sachs, 2015).

Environmental Sustainability as the Foundation of Inclusive Development

Poverty Reduction and Environmental Sustainability: Environmental sustainability is closely connected with poverty reduction because natural resources constitute an important component of the livelihood systems of low-income populations (World Bank, 2006; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Agriculture, fisheries, forestry and other natural-resource-dependent activities provide income and food security for millions of households, particularly in rural and developing communities (FAO, 2017; World Bank, 2006). Environmental degradation can reduce the productivity of these resources through soil degradation, water scarcity, deforestation and biodiversity loss, thereby weakening the economic security and resilience of vulnerable communities (FAO, 2017; IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2022).

Climate change further intensifies these pressures. Extreme weather events, changing rainfall patterns, droughts, floods and rising temperatures can reduce agricultural productivity and damage household assets and infrastructure (IPCC, 2022; IPCC, 2023). Climate-related shocks can increase food insecurity, reduce incomes and push vulnerable households deeper into poverty (World Bank, 2024; IPCC, 2022). The World Bank therefore identifies climate change as a major threat to poverty and inequality reduction because environmental shocks can reverse development gains and weaken livelihood security (World Bank, 2024). Therefore, environmental sustainability should be integrated into poverty-reduction strategies, rural-

development programmes and social-protection policies rather than treated as a separate policy domain (World Bank, 2006; UNDP, 2020).

Sustainable Livelihoods and Natural Resources: Natural ecosystems provide food, water, fuel, raw materials and other ecosystem services that support livelihoods and human welfare (Daily, 1997; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Forests, wetlands, rivers, coastal ecosystems and agricultural landscapes perform ecological functions that are essential to human societies, including water regulation, soil formation, pollination and climate regulation (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Costanza et al., 2014). Sustainable management of these resources can strengthen livelihood security while reducing ecological degradation and improving community resilience (Ostrom, 1990; FAO, 2017).

The UNEP *Global Resources Outlook 2024* emphasizes that natural resources are essential for implementing the 2030 Agenda but warns that global resource extraction and consumption continue to increase rapidly (UNEP, 2024). Resource-intensive development can intensify climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation and pollution (International Resource Panel, 2019; UNEP, 2024). Consequently, sustainable resource management is essential for ensuring that economic development does not undermine the resource base upon which present and future livelihoods depend (WCED, 1987; Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015).

Environmental Sustainability and Public Health: Environmental quality directly influences human health. Air pollution, contaminated water, inadequate sanitation, hazardous waste, chemical exposure and ecosystem degradation can contribute to disease, premature mortality and reduced quality of life (WHO, 2016; WHO, 2021). Environmental risks can disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged communities because they often experience greater exposure while possessing fewer resources to protect themselves or recover from environmental hazards (UNDP, 2020; IPCC, 2022).

Sustainable development therefore requires investments in clean air, safe drinking water, sanitation, waste management, sustainable transport and healthy urban environments (United Nations, 2015; WHO, 2016). SDGs 3, 6, 11 and 12 demonstrate the close relationship between health, environmental quality, sustainable settlements and responsible consumption (United Nations, 2015). Improving environmental conditions can consequently contribute simultaneously to public health, social equality and human development (WHO, 2021; UNDP, 2020).

Climate Change, Vulnerability and Social Justice: Climate change represents one of the strongest challenges to inclusive development because its impacts are not distributed equally across populations and regions (IPCC, 2022; IPCC, 2023). Communities with lower incomes and weaker infrastructure frequently possess fewer resources for adaptation and recovery, making them more vulnerable to climate-related hazards (IPCC, 2022). Climate change can consequently reinforce existing inequalities by affecting livelihoods, food security, health, housing and access to essential services (IPCC, 2022; World Bank, 2024).

Climate justice therefore needs to become an important component of environmental sustainability. A just transition should protect workers, low-income households and vulnerable communities while economies shift towards low-carbon production (ILO, 2015; IPCC, 2022). Policies must consider who bears the costs of environmental transition and who receives its benefits, while ensuring meaningful participation of affected communities in decision-making (UNDP, 2020; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Environmental sustainability is thus closely connected with principles of distributive justice, procedural justice and intergenerational equity (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; WCED, 1987).

Gender Equality and Environmental Sustainability: Environmental degradation also has gendered consequences. In many communities, women play important roles in collecting water, securing household

energy, managing food and supporting household livelihoods, making them particularly vulnerable to environmental scarcity (UNDP, 2020; UN Women, 2022). Water scarcity, deforestation and declining agricultural productivity can increase women's unpaid work and economic vulnerability and may restrict opportunities for education and paid employment (UN Women, 2022; IPCC, 2022).

Environmental sustainability can contribute to gender equality when women are included in natural-resource governance, climate adaptation, renewable-energy initiatives, agricultural programmes and local decision-making (UNDP, 2020; UN Women, 2022). Women's participation can also strengthen environmental decision-making by incorporating local knowledge and community-level experience (Ostrom, 1990; UN Women, 2022). Inclusive environmental governance should therefore recognize women not merely as vulnerable groups but as important agents of environmental transformation and sustainable development (IPCC, 2022; UN Women, 2022).

Sustainable Economic Growth and Green Employment: Environmental sustainability does not necessarily conflict with economic development. Instead, it can create new opportunities through renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, ecological restoration, green construction, sustainable transportation, waste management and circular production (UNEP, 2011; OECD, 2011). Green economic transformation can therefore support both environmental protection and employment creation (ILO, 2015; UNEP, 2011).

The transition towards a green economy can generate employment while reducing environmental pressures, but its benefits depend upon appropriate investments in skills, technology, finance and social protection (ILO, 2015; OECD, 2011). Workers displaced from environmentally intensive industries require opportunities for retraining and decent employment so that the transition does not increase socioeconomic inequality (ILO, 2015; IPCC, 2022). Thus, the green transition should be designed as an inclusive economic transformation rather than simply a technological transition (ILO, 2015; UNDP, 2020).

Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency: The conventional linear economic model—extract, produce, consume and dispose—creates significant environmental pressure through resource depletion, pollution and waste generation (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013; UNEP, 2024). A circular economy offers an alternative by emphasizing resource efficiency, reuse, repair, recycling, refurbishment, product longevity and waste minimization (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; UNEP, 2024). Such approaches can reduce dependence on virgin resources while maintaining the value of products and materials for longer periods (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013; International Resource Panel, 2019).

Circular economy strategies can also support inclusive development by creating employment in recycling, repair, refurbishment and sustainable manufacturing (ILO, 2018; UNEP, 2024). Small enterprises and local communities can participate in circular production systems, although appropriate regulation, infrastructure, skills and access to finance are necessary (ILO, 2018; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Circularity can therefore contribute simultaneously to resource efficiency, environmental protection, innovation and employment generation (UNEP, 2024; ILO, 2018).

Major Challenges to Environmental Sustainability: Despite growing recognition of environmental sustainability, several structural challenges remain. First, unsustainable consumption and production continue to place increasing pressure on natural resources, ecosystems and planetary systems (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015; UNEP, 2024). UNEP reports that global resource extraction has increased substantially over recent decades and that resource-use patterns are distributed unequally across countries and income groups (UNEP, 2024). Such resource-intensive development contributes to environmental degradation, pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change (International Resource Panel, 2019; UNEP, 2024).

Second, climate change creates increasingly complex risks for development, affecting agriculture, water resources, health, infrastructure and livelihoods (IPCC, 2022; IPCC, 2023). Third, biodiversity loss threatens ecosystem services and the livelihoods dependent upon them (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; IPBES, 2019). Fourth, environmental policies may produce distributional consequences when transition costs are disproportionately imposed on low-income groups and vulnerable workers (ILO, 2015; IPCC, 2022). Fifth, developing countries frequently face constraints in finance, technology, institutional capacity and infrastructure, limiting their ability to address environmental risks and adapt to climate change (United Nations, 2015; IPCC, 2023).

Another challenge is fragmented governance. Environmental issues cross administrative and sectoral boundaries, yet policies are often developed separately for agriculture, energy, transport, industry, health and social protection (Ostrom, 1990; Sachs, 2015). Such fragmentation can create conflicts between economic, social and environmental objectives and weaken policy effectiveness (United Nations, 2015; UNEP, 2024). An integrated governance approach is therefore necessary to align economic planning, environmental protection, social welfare and long-term sustainability (Sachs, 2015; UNDP, 2020). Effective environmental governance also requires public participation, institutional accountability and coordination among governments, businesses, civil society and local communities (Ostrom, 1990; United Nations, 2015).

Strategies for Promoting Inclusive and Environmentally Sustainable Development

Green Economic Transformation: Governments should encourage economic activities that generate employment and income while reducing environmental impacts (UNEP, 2011; OECD, 2011). Renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, green infrastructure and environmentally responsible industries can become important components of national development strategies (ILO, 2015; UNDP, 2020). Green economic transformation should simultaneously promote resource efficiency, technological innovation, decent employment and social inclusion (OECD, 2011; UNEP, 2024).

Renewable Energy Transition: Expanding affordable and reliable renewable energy can reduce dependence on fossil fuels while improving energy security and creating employment opportunities (UNEP, 2011; ILO, 2015). Renewable-energy development can also contribute to poverty reduction by improving access to modern energy services in underserved communities (UNDP, 2020). Energy policies should therefore prioritize universal access, affordability and reliability while ensuring that low-income households can benefit from the transition (United Nations, 2015; IPCC, 2022).

Sustainable Agriculture: Agricultural development should increasingly incorporate soil conservation, water efficiency, agroecological practices, climate-resilient crops and reduced dependence on environmentally harmful inputs (FAO, 2017; IPCC, 2022). Sustainable agricultural practices can improve food security, ecosystem resilience and long-term productivity while reducing environmental degradation (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; FAO, 2017). Small farmers should receive access to technology, credit, extension services, infrastructure and markets so that environmental sustainability does not increase rural inequality (World Bank, 2006; FAO, 2017).

Sustainable Urban Development: Rapid urbanization requires environmentally sustainable infrastructure, efficient public transport, green spaces, effective waste management and climate-resilient housing (United Nations, 2015; UNDP, 2020). Sustainable urban planning can reduce pollution, resource consumption and climate vulnerability while improving public health and quality of life (WHO, 2016; IPCC, 2022). Investments in sustainable cities should therefore combine environmental protection with affordable housing, accessible services and inclusive infrastructure (World Bank, 2024; United Nations, 2015).

Environmental Education and Awareness: Environmental sustainability requires behavioural as well as technological transformation (Kollmuss& Agyeman, 2002; Stern, 2000). Education can improve environmental literacy and encourage sustainable consumption, waste reduction, energy conservation and responsible use of natural resources (UNESCO, 2021; UNEP, 2024). Environmental education should therefore be integrated across formal and informal education systems and connected with everyday practices and community participation (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2015). Greater environmental awareness can strengthen individual responsibility while supporting broader institutional and policy-level sustainability (Kollmuss& Agyeman, 2002).

Inclusive Environmental Governance: Local communities should participate meaningfully in environmental decision-making because community participation can incorporate local knowledge, improve accountability and strengthen the legitimacy of environmental policies (Ostrom, 1990; UNDP, 2020). Participatory governance can also contribute to more effective management of common resources and improve cooperation between governments and communities (Ostrom, 1990). Particular attention should be given to women, youth, Indigenous communities, small producers and other groups that may be excluded from conventional decision-making processes (IPCC, 2022; United Nations, 2015). Inclusive governance should therefore combine environmental responsibility with transparency, participation and social justice (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Sachs, 2015).

Sustainable Finance: The transition towards sustainable development requires substantial financial resources for mitigation, adaptation, infrastructure and technological transformation (IPCC, 2022; United Nations, 2015). Green bonds, sustainable investment, climate finance, blended finance and responsible banking can support renewable energy, sustainable infrastructure and climate adaptation (OECD, 2011; UNDP, 2020). Financial institutions can also encourage environmentally responsible business practices through lending and investment decisions that incorporate environmental, social and governance considerations (UNEP, 2011; Sachs, 2015). Greater access to sustainable finance is particularly important for developing countries and vulnerable communities facing financial and technological constraints (IPCC, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Strengthening International Cooperation: Environmental problems frequently cross national boundaries. Climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean pollution, resource depletion and transboundary environmental risks therefore require international cooperation and coordinated policy responses (United Nations, 2015; IPCC, 2023). International cooperation is particularly important for finance, technology transfer, capacity building and knowledge sharing between developed and developing countries (United Nations, 2015; UNDP, 2020). SDG 17 emphasizes partnerships and international cooperation as essential means of implementing the sustainable development agenda (United Nations, 2015).

Discussion: The central argument of this article is that environmental sustainability and inclusive development are not competing objectives but mutually dependent dimensions of sustainable development (WCED, 1987; Sen, 1999; Sachs, 2015). Environmental sustainability provides the ecological conditions necessary for long-term economic and social progress, while inclusive development can strengthen the social institutions and participation required for effective environmental management (Ostrom, 1990; UNDP, 2020). Development that destroys natural resources, increases pollution or intensifies climate vulnerability may generate short-term economic benefits but can undermine long-term welfare and development gains (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015).

Current international evidence reinforces this argument. The UN's 2030 Agenda establishes an integrated framework linking poverty reduction, social inclusion, economic prosperity and environmental protection

(United Nations, 2015). The IPCC demonstrates that climate change interacts with poverty, inequality and vulnerability, thereby restricting sustainable development opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged populations (IPCC, 2022; IPCC, 2023). UNEP highlights the need to transform resource-use patterns and address the unequal distribution of environmental impacts associated with increasing resource extraction and consumption (UNEP, 2024). The World Bank similarly emphasizes that poverty reduction on a liveable planet requires stronger resilience alongside reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions and environmental damage (World Bank, 2024).

The implication is that environmental sustainability should be mainstreamed across economic, social and institutional policies rather than treated as a separate environmental agenda (Sachs, 2015; UNDP, 2020). A genuinely inclusive development model should ensure that vulnerable communities are protected from environmental risks, participate meaningfully in decision-making and gain access to the employment, technology and livelihood opportunities created by the green transition (ILO, 2015; IPCC, 2022). Ultimately, sustainable development requires an integrated approach in which environmental protection, poverty reduction, social justice, economic opportunity and institutional participation reinforce one another (United Nations, 2015; UNEP, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

Conclusion: Environmental sustainability is increasingly recognized as a prerequisite for inclusive and sustainable development. The quality of the environment directly affects livelihoods, health, food security, economic productivity and social well-being. At the same time, environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, thereby intensifying poverty and inequality. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and resource depletion consequently represent not only ecological challenges but also major development challenges.

Ultimately, inclusive and sustainable development requires recognition of the interdependence between people and the planet. The 2030 Agenda's commitment to balancing economic, social and environmental dimensions provides an important framework for this transformation. Environmental sustainability should therefore be understood not as an additional component of development, but as one of its fundamental foundations. Development can remain inclusive and durable only when the ecological systems that sustain human life and economic activity are protected, restored and managed equitably for present and future generations.

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