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*THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT: THE GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE*

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### The Political Economy of Sustainable Development: The Governance Perspective

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# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of sustainable development has increasingly stimulated interest among development practitioners, scholars and politicians regarding its relevance to addressing development problems. It has been referred to as a development paradigm and a moral imperative as well as a “utopian” concept. Along with these perceptions there are varied definitions and interpretations, where there appears to be a common theme that relates to a concern for improving people’s quality of life, generally referred to as human development. The paper is intended to contribute to the dialogue on the relevance of the sustainable development concept to improving human development. It discusses sustainable development in the context of governance within a political economy framework with reference to African countries in general and Liberia in particular. It provides an operational definition and explores the concept’s relevance and applicability to improving human development as a dynamic process. From this perspective, the premise of the paper is that institutional failures contribute immensely to the current state of many African countries socio-economic malaise. Recognizing the inherent interplay of power politics and the personal dynamics of the African political economy, the paper provides brief preliminary insights for the development of an institutional sustainable development framework that includes several traditional organizational reform measures and institutional performance mechanisms characterized as best practices. The paper argues that these measures should be buttressed by more innovative pursuit of institutional viability through the effective implementation of appropriate strategies. The objective of the strategies should be to inculcate a value system ingrained in civic responsibility, undertake constitutional reforms and institutionalize robust capacity building programs geared towards the transformation of institutions into productive and sustainable organizational entities. It further suggests that capacity building should place a special focus on personal development. This is considered important so that progress and achievement may be realized not by the personalization of the issues or a resort to violence but rather by individual and groups’ exemplary character of integrity, competence and genuine commitment. The paper views this as a people-centered approach to institutional development.

**Key words:** sustainable development framework, governance, political economy, institutional development

## I. INTRODUCTION

In little over a decade, sustainable development has increasingly stimulated interest among development practitioners, scholars and politicians. The concept has been referred to as a development paradigm, an anthropocentric moral imperative and a vision. Several others see it merely as “buzz words” and a “utopian” concept that is inherently limited in its applicability to poverty-stricken countries. Along with these perceptions there are a plethora of varied definitions and interpretations. Notwithstanding, there appears to be a common theme among them that relates to a concern for improving people’s present and future quality of life. In this paper the quality of life is referred to as human development, which is defined as the ability for people to lead a long and healthy life, to acquire knowledge and skills and the opportunity to utilize them, as well as to have access to productive resources needed for a decent standard of living (UNDP, 1996). Implicitly, it involves the production, distribution and utility of goods, services and social capital with a value system embedded in the entire process.

The focus on sustainable development began to emerge when intellectual momentum shifted from the perception that development was simply an economic process measurable in economic aggregates such as gross domestic product and gross national product. This shift engendered a new view of development as a holistic process comprising socio-economic, financial and ecological policies, effective governance and an enabling socio-political environment having the requisite human and institutional capacity to perform appropriate tasks effectively and efficiently with a view to improving the quality of life. Development, so defined, should be people-centered, equitably distributed and environmentally and socially sustainable (UNDP 1996).

In most less developed countries, the pursuit of human development has been and remains exceedingly challenging due to the complexity of the issues, the peculiarities of contexts and the enormity of the constraints. Considering the situation in these countries, and if sustainable development is to have any substantive operational significance, it must be defined more concretely to reflect contextual and spatial specificity. Otherwise it would serve only as an abstraction of limited pertinence to comprehending the dynamics and profound complexities of the issues concerning the improvement of human development. Consequently, its relevance to developing strategic actions to address these issues may be of little or no essence to the process.

This paper is intended to contribute to the dialogue on the relevance of the sustainable development concept to improving human development. The paper accepts the notion that seeking for such relevance is best facilitated when it is considered within a specific context. Thus, the paper discusses sustainable development in the context of governance with reference to African countries in general and Liberia in particular within a political economy framework.

The rationale for discussing sustainable development in a governance context is predicated on the pivotal role of governance in the sustainable development process. According to the World Summit on Sustainable Development's Plan of Implementation, the basis of sustainable development are sound environmental, social and economic policies, democratic institutions responsive to the needs of the people, the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, gender equality and an enabling environment for investment (WSSD, 2003:1). Governance is a fundamental part and parcel of this basis.

The paper is organized into six sections. Following this introduction, section two seeks to provide an effective operational meaning of sustainable development. It also discusses governance and political economy as its contextual feature and framework for discussion with a focus on the institutional aspect of sustainable development. Section three presents an overview of the sustainable development challenges faced by most African countries. Section four discusses the Liberian situation, as a case study to provide an empirical content. This section is based largely on secondary information and the author's experience. It is limited in terms of statistical techniques for determining causal relationship. Nevertheless, it provides a credible indication through which one may be able to understand the dramatic downward spiral of Liberia's socio-economic conditions and the imperative for recovery along a path of sustainable development. Section five provides brief preliminary insights of an evolving institutional framework in which sustainable development, defined and placed in a specific context, may be relevant to this imperative. Section six provides concluding remarks.

## **II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND CONTEXT**

The recent popular usage of the concept and its proliferation originated in the 1980 World Conservation Strategy document of the World Conservation Union. In the document, the conditions for development to be sustainable are articulated in the following statement.

For development to be sustainable it must first take account of social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and non-living resource base and of the long-term as well as the short-term advantages and disadvantages of alternative actions (IUCN, cited in Dalal-Clayton, 2000: 7).

Later, the use of the concept became more prominent after the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987. In this report, sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 8). The Report notes that it involves "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investment, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations"(WCED: 46). From these definitions, it would seem that the essentials for achieving sustainable development are fluid and fraught with generalities so much so that

it is not easily amenable to defining policy prescriptions, investment criteria and operational mechanisms.

A review of the literature suggests that sustainable development in less developed countries requires effective governance, a dynamic and enabling international environment supportive of international cooperation particularly in the areas of finance, technology transfer, debt and trade and full participation of these countries in global decision-making. It is said to also require peace, security, stability and respect for human rights (WSSD), respect for cultural diversity (Maser, 1999; UNESCO, 2003), an ecologically balanced system (Urbanska and Webb, 2000) and ethics (Newton, 2002).

With such wide array of requirements for achieving sustainable development, it is therefore understandable that the meaning and interpretation of sustainable development have also been expanding. Daly (1996), observes that the way to render any concept innocuous is to expand its meaning to include virtually everything. He further states that by 1991 the phrase had acquired such cachet that everything had to be sustainable. Nevertheless, he argues that most important concepts are not subject to analytically precise definitions and contends that they are largely dialectical. From this view, in the case of sustainable development, he feels that one could still give content to and enhance the analytics of the concept. His clarification of the concept integrates sustainability, sufficiency, equity, and efficiency. Implicitly, he suggests that sustainable development involves activities that strive for “sufficient per capita wealth that is efficiently maintained and allocated, and equitably distributed for the maximum number of people that can be sustained over time under these conditions” (Daly, 1996:220). In his clarification of this definition, he provides an interesting analysis on the issues of the inherent limitations of growth, the meaning of development and the criteria for sustainability. An in-depth discussion of these issues however falls beyond the scope of this paper.

A review of other perceptions of sustainable development is insightful. Guimaraes (2003) suggests that what determines the quality of life in any given community and hence its sustainability is the synergy of the relationships among population, organization, environment and technology. He explains each of these factors as follows. The population factor includes size, composition, density and demographic dynamics. Organizational factor involves social organizations, aspirations, values, culture, production and consumption patterns, social stratification and pattern of conflict resolution. Environmental factor involves the physical and built environment, environmental process and services and natural resources. Technological factor involves innovation, technical progress and energy use.

The concept is also defined by the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC, 2003) organization as a long term focus that seeks to preserve and enhance economic, social and natural capital to improve the quality of people’s lives and ensure a continuing legacy for the future; a coordinated and integrated approach to decision making, incorporating

social, economic and environmental considerations; and recognition of the interdependence of domestic and global activities. Barbier (1987) interprets sustainable development as a process, whose objective is to reduce the absolute poverty of the world's poor through providing lasting and secured livelihoods that minimize resource depletion, environmental degradation, cultural disruption and social instability.

Other scholars and organizations have advanced additional definitions that they believe are more operational. Warhurst (1998:3) citing Serageldin (1996) states that as a working concept, sustainable development may be defined as “a process whereby future generations receive as much capital per capita as, or more than the current generation has available”. He explains that capital includes natural capital, physical (or produced) capital, and social (including human) capital, the measurement of which, together may be considered as forming the basis of sustainable economic development and growth. He further indicates that in this process, a transformation occurs in which some natural capital would be depleted and changed into physical capital, which in-turn would depreciate, but that with technology, more efficient replacements would be generated.

UNDP (1994) describes sustainable development as a process for realizing human development “...in an inclusive, connected, equitable, prudent and secured manner” (cited in Bansal and Howard, 1997: 16). In essence, slightly expanding on what Warhurst adapted from Bansal and Howard by including the inclusive factor, one may deduce that the key elements of sustainable development are: (a) inclusiveness, - involving and encouraging the participation of the people; (b) connectivity, - embracing ecological, social, and economic interdependence; (c) equity - ensuring fairness within and across generations and species; (d) prudence - exercising duties of care and prevention, technologically, scientifically and politically; and (e) security - ensuring safety from chronic threats and protection from harmful disruption.

Ohiorhenuan and Ohiorhenuan (1998:31) define sustainable development from an institutionalist perspective by focusing on the key words “sustainability” and “development” and by integrating the preservation of the ecosystem and social capital. They indicate that sustainability is “the attribute of enduring without giving way and that the sustainability of a thing or process lies in its continuity through time”. Utilizing Pearce, Barbier and Markandya's (1990) portrayal of development as a vector of desirable social objectives and explicitly factoring in the requirement that the ecosystem be preserved, they define sustainable development as a process in which the development vector increases monotonically over time.

From a further review of their discussion, one may argue that irrespective of sustainable development being a process or an outcome, it must endure over time. From an institutionalist perspective, whatever causes the process or outcome to endure must be appropriate, and effectively managed and maintained. In addition, they argue that external conditions that impact on sustainable development must remain favorable “...not as an absence of change, but rather the maintenance of (relative) stability in the presence

(of these) conditions and/or continuous throughout”. The authors further point out that the applicability of the concept is contingent on the specific domain of intervention such as the global domain, the national domain and the sub-national domain.

The perceptions above provide only a snapshot of the varied interpretations of the sustainable development concept. A more detailed review of the literature suggests that these perceptions are intended to suit specific purposes like social aspirations and political consensus. Others reflect specific domains of certain sectors and disciplines like economics, environment and sociology. In the economics realm, definitions are mixed in terms of the central or integral role of growth in the process with divergent views on the “limits” or “no limits” of growth. A few attempt to describe it in two components – the meaning of development and the conditions necessary for sustainability. In general, the definitions reflect a concern with the integration of social, economic and environmental factors in decision-making. The concept is also viewed as a process and as an outcome.

The thrust of this paper is concerned most with the process dimension. The essence of achieving an outcome is through a process. Moreover, the outcome, in the context of sustainable development, should not be viewed as static but rather as a dynamic phenomenon. Given the evolving needs of human development, there can be no end point or final state of sustainable development. What is important is achieving meaningful progress in creating and sustaining a positive impact on human development in the sustainable development process. From this perspective, and based on the integration of three factors - economy, society and environment – emphasis is placed on identifying strategic actions through which the process could be expedited.

It must be recognized, as Dalal-Clayton and Bass (2000:9) observe, that in situations where integration of the three factors is not possible, the process should involve “making alternative choices and negotiating tradeoffs”. They correctly assert that such factors as peace and security, prevailing economic interests, political systems, institutional arrangements and cultural norms will undeniably influence policy decision-making and negotiations. The governance of this process, with particular emphasis on the institutional aspects, is critical.

The term “institution” according to Ohiorhenuan and Ohiorhenuan (1998:30) may refer to “a socially recognized human organization providing a valued service” as well as “a matrix of socially sanctioned norms and rules of conduct governing individual and group behavior – ‘the rules of the game’”. The “rules of the game” include not only regulations, laws, policies and legal decisions from a court of law, but also the rules and policies governing the behavior and practices of those who make and apply those rules. The latter is particularly relevant to administrative law and procedure, electoral laws and civil service regulations. In addition there is the constitution, the rules that guide all rule making and establish the legitimacy of individuals and organizations’ actions (Williams et al, 2003). Utilizing institution as conceived above, serves as a mechanism through which results-oriented strategic actions may be taken to realize objective sustainable development outcomes.

Moreover, there is an inherent political dimension in the process that goes beyond formal political systems, which should not be ignored. This is generally referred to as the “political will” or “political commitment”. These terms refer to both the psychological attributes of politicians as well as an outcome of objective reality determined by a political playing field (Kelegama and Parikh). The psychological attributes would explain why politicians act differently to similar situations. The outcome perspective would explain why irrespective of which politician is in power they act virtually the same. The recognition of these realities justifies the governance context and political economy approach for this paper.

Considering the issues discussed above and utilizing Ohiorhenuan and Ohiorhenuan’s explanation of sustainability we may derive a perception of sustainable development that reflects an action and results orientation. From this perspective, sustainable development may be defined as a continuous process of preserving and enhancing the production, distribution and utility of economic, social and natural capital to improve the status of the current and future human development. The process involves multiple mechanisms and domains of intervention in which political and institutional factors are critical for policy decision-making, implementation, evaluation and follow-up actions. To ensure its enduring element, the political and institutional factors must be managed to appropriately adjust to possible changes for the maintenance of stability and an enabling operating environment. Thus, this will require appropriate institutions, effective leadership and a results-oriented management capacity. A long-standing debate is on determining what is required to achieve this desired state of affairs.

### **III. GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL ECONOMY**

To explore answers to the issue above, one must first consider that the factors mentioned - appropriate institutions, effective leadership and results-oriented management capacity - are attributes of governance. Like sustainable development, governance is also a concept that is widely used in the development literature with a variety of meanings and interpretations. An in-depth discussion of these definitions is beyond the limitation of this paper. However, since it is an issue of concern, a brief discussion of the concept is necessary for contextual clarity.

The increasing use of the concept began when it was diagnosed that barriers to structural adjustment were due not only to the substance of policies, but also to the policy environment. Thus governance became associated with democracy, culture and institutional characteristics that cover several issues. Frischtak (1994:1) explains this further in her statement that:

Institutional building and design; the nature and transparency of decision-making procedures; interest representation and conflict resolution mechanisms; the limits of

authority and leadership accountability – all of which ultimately concern the very essence of the polity—are frequently identified as governance issues and fill the expanding agenda of what can be called the political economy of structural adjustment.

Depending on a particular definition of governance, the use of the concept has been criticized as being overly prescriptive to a particular political system, insensitive to African culture and beclouded with subjectivity when used as “good” governance. To avoid these criticisms, Shihata (1990) views governance as the provision of universal and abstract rules, the institutions that enforce them and the predictable mechanisms to regulate conflicts over both rules and their enforcement. In her discussion of governance deficiencies, Frischtak describes governance as a process of coordinating the aggregation of diverging interest to promote policy that can credibly be taken to represent the public interest. It appears that, as Kruiter (1996) observes, the definition, usefulness, ethnical connotation and political dimensions of the concept are still evolving.

Generally, as indicated above, governance involves institutions, laws, rules, regulations, policies and enforcement mechanisms in pursuit of specified objectives. To derive a working definition of governance for this paper Landell-Mills’ (1991) definition of governance is useful. Explicitly incorporating the institutional dimension, governance refers to the legitimate and calculated use of authority and power in the exercise of control over society and the management of its resources intended to achieve shared or agreed development goals through appropriate institutional mechanisms. In the process, it is expected to promote accountability, transparency, and rule of law, participation and other factors that engender and nurture an enabling institutional and socio-economic environment. This definition dovetails with Martin’s (1994) observation that it encompasses the nature and functioning of the state institutional and structural arrangements, decision-making processes, policy formulation, implementation capacity, information flows, leadership effectiveness and the nature of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled.

It may therefore be argued that the success or failure of the sustainable development process largely rests on the quality of institutions and the political environment. The importance of institutions and the political environment however does not repudiate the critical role of other traditional factors, land, labor and capital, in the sustainable development process. The focus is being placed on the political environment and institutions since the governance of all other factors of production operate through institutions in a political environment. This political environment characterizes the interaction of different individuals and groups in society seeking to influence public policy for socioeconomic development or to promote the lack of it in pursuit of their own interests. The dynamics involved is referred to as the political economy. It is within this framework that the challenges of sustainable development are discussed.

#### **IV. THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

Africa is said to be the least developed continent despite its rich endowment of natural resources and a considerable trained caliber of human resources including those in the Diaspora. It is believed that these resources could make a meaningful developmental impact if their preservation, enhancement and utility were facilitated in a manner most advantageous to African human development. This would lead to a change in Africa's production pattern from primary production and export of raw materials to industrial production of semi-finished and finished products. It would contribute to the retention and further development of its trained and experienced human resources rather than accelerate continuous brain drain. Exercising effective control and management of these resources would lead to opportunities for improved livelihoods of the people and ultimately to a higher quality of life. Unfortunately, poverty, in all its dimensions, is most prevalent in Africa and is particularly pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa.

As noted in Balogun (2003), sub-Saharan Africa's literacy rate is 60 percent, which is significantly below the developing countries average of 73 percent. Life expectancy at birth is about 48.8 years while it is over 60 years in all other regions. About 46 percent of people in sub-Saharan Africa live below the income poverty line of less than US\$ 1 a day. Compared to East Asia, the Pacific and Latin America, this rate is 15 percent. Access to electricity, telephones, other telecommunication services, pipe borne water supply and sanitation facilities are all appallingly low relative to most other regions in the World. In terms of civil and other conflicts that further exacerbate the state of poverty, about 40 percent of sub Saharan African countries have experienced at least one of such conflicts over the last 40 years. UNDP notes that about 1.5 million persons died as casualties of war over the period 1990-1999 in sub-Saharan Africa. This amount is significantly higher than the casualties recorded for other regions.

The situation is even worse given that it has generally regressed in recent years. This is reflected by UNDP (2002:13) in its observation that:

...the lives of (sub-Saharan Africans) very poor people are getting worse. The share of people living on US\$1 a day was about the same at the end of the 1990s – 47% as at the start. Thus, because of population growth, the number of poor people in the region has increased. And while most of the world has increased the share of children who are immunized against the leading diseases, since 1990 immunization rates in sub-Saharan Africa have fallen below 50%.

Africa is also faced with major environmental issues. These issues include pollution, particularly those affecting fresh water resources and marine life; coastal erosion and other land degradation; scarce water resources; droughts; and floods. Moreover, the pattern of African livelihood pressurizes the natural resource base so much so that its sustainability is often threatened. Generally, in the context of sustainable development,

striking and maintaining a balance in the use and preservation of environmental resources as well as minimizing the impact of environmental damages to Africa caused by Western and other countries, are daunting challenges Africa currently faces.

This general state of affairs has largely been attributed to a host of factors, some of which are more relevant than others in certain areas. These factors include, the historical legacies of slave trade and colonialism, external intervention in the internal affairs of these countries for ulterior economic and political motives, including the Cold War machinations and manipulations. The problems are also caused by the imposition of ill-conceived structural adjustment programs and a crippling debt burden. On the internal socio-political front, the causes are attributed to political authoritarianism, the military intervention into politics, poor management of conflicts, self-aggrandizement by the political leadership, patrimonial dynamics of African politics, human rights violations and ethnic rivalries. The causes may also be attributed to a poorly developed civil society. Most civil societies in Africa are not sufficiently capacitated to substantively participate in public affairs, demand for quality public services and to effectively hold public officials accountable.

From an institutional perspective, the lack of adequate institutional capacity and an un-conducive socio-economic and political governance environment also contribute to the current state of affairs in African countries. In most of these countries, the institutional systems lack well-defined and effectively implemented regulations, procedures and processes that minimize the domination and manipulation of the system by political clouts and cliques. In cases where they exist, they are regarded as mere academic administrative instruments and therefore are blatantly ignored with impunity. In general, the system is largely characterized by ineffective utilization of human resources, poor communication, over-centralization of authority, corruption, political patrimony, ad hoc adherence to policies and procedures and a pervasive lack of transparency and accountability.

These factors cause institutional failures, which in turn contribute to poor policy implementation. This situation has immensely contributed to large transactions costs, political and economic uncertainties, civil crisis and ultimately to unsustainable growth and development.

There have been attempts to address these institutional issues over time through various reforms. Balogun (2003) categorizes these reforms as First Generation Reforms, Structural Adjustment Reforms and Internally-Driven Reforms. He indicates the First Generation Reforms were instituted in the early post-independence period with the declared objectives to equip the public service institutions inherited from the colonial administration for the post-independence challenges of nation building and economic modernization. Particular emphasis was however tacitly placed on ensuring the loyalty of the civil service to the political leadership rather than the state. To address the issue, he further explains that several commissions, including the Ndegwa Commission in Kenya,

the Udoji Commission in Nigeria, the Mills-Odoi Commission in Ghana and the Wamalwa Commission in Swaziland, among others, proposed the installation of management programs considered most modern at the time.

These measures had very limited or no institutional performance improvement. The reasons were generally ascribed to half-hearted or the absence of political commitment, the disconnect between the reforms' dominant concerns with performance, productivity and efficiency and the administrative and political leaders' preoccupation with the capture and retention of power, authority and wealth.

The Structural Adjustment Reforms, while they were basically not concerned with typical institutional reform issues, affected institutional public service delivery capacity. This was especially pronounced in the education and health sectors as well as other areas that directly impact on poverty alleviation. Moreover, the Structural Adjustment Programs reforms led to the dismantling of public service institutions without providing any viable alternatives (Adedeji, 1992). It also aggravated the ethics and accountability crisis in the civil service of many African countries. This period engendered a phenomenally increased incidence of moonlighting, inflation of contract prices, bribery and other forms of corruption (Nti, 1989).

Recognizing the virtual lack of success in these reforms a few countries introduced the Inward-Oriented Institutional reforms. These reforms were identified, planned, designed and introduced in a participatory manner to address specific problems. They included measures to inculcate the ethos of professionalism, dedication, accountability, transparency and attitudinal changes. In some countries the application of information and communication technology (ICT) was introduced to enhance the personnel management system including improved remuneration structures and other incentives linked with performance. Moreover, some countries have embraced democratic norms in which changes in government are achieved through constitutional means and conflicts are resolved peacefully rather than through various forms of systemic violence. In several cases these reform measures and attitudinal changes have been encouraging, but there is still substantial room for improvement.

## **V. LIBERIA: A CASE OF UNSUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

During the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, Liberia's economic performance was appreciably high. In terms of the real gross national product (GNP) growth index, Liberia's performance, using 1954 as a base year, was second to Japan with Liberia having an index measure of 175 as compared to Japan's 180 (LHDR, 2000). In comparison with Korea, according to Lindenberg (1999) over the period 1965 to 1987, Liberia ranked 58<sup>th</sup> in per capita GNP (US\$642), while Korea ranked 56<sup>th</sup> (US\$687) among 120 countries based on data and country coverage by the World Bank. By 1987 Korea had emerged as one of the world's highest developing countries in terms of growth

and human development as measured by the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI). Korea's per capita GNP increased from US\$687 to US\$2,690 and was ranked among the top 30 nations of the world. Liberia's performance, in contrast, significantly declined. Its per capita GNP fell from US\$642 to US\$450 and was ranked among the lowest 30 countries on the PQLI scores. Even the Human Development Index ranks Liberia and Korea similarly to the PQLI scores. Currently, these differences have considerably widened with Liberia's situation being exacerbated by the colossal devastation caused by its civil wars.

Empirical studies have suggested that such difference in performance among countries may be ascribed to endogenous and exogenous factors. For example, a study by Lindenberg referred to above, identifies the following factors:

1. Endogenous Factors
  - a. Natural endowment – Examples include mineral production, population size and population density.
  - b. Cultural and ethnic endowment – Variables include ethnic, racial and religious diversity and region
  - c. Baseline human resource endowments – These are conditions resulting from earlier social investments such as initial levels of literacy, life expectancy and infant mortality.
  - d. Political and economic institutional context and continuity – This refers to the type of political regime and economic system. Long-term continuity refers to the percentage of time democratic regimes were in office and measures of political instability like non-programmed changes of Presidents or Prime Ministers.
2. Exogenous Factors
  - a. Natural disasters – the number of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts and floods, as examples.
  - b. External military interventions
  - c. External economic influences – changes in terms of trade, export product and market concentration
  - d. Access to foreign flows – annual average total debt, average debt service and average aid.

The Lindenberg study, utilizing statistical analysis, suggests that among the endogenous factors, initial human resource base and its institutional context were the most important determinants of human development. For economic growth alone, the endogenous factors that mattered were low political instability, region and ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. Since economic growth, in the context of this paper, is intrinsic to human

development, the determinants of human development would include those that are considered specific to economic growth as well as the regeneration and prudent utility of environmental resources.

For exogenous factors, the study suggests that the terms of trade, export product mix and access to foreign resources inflows are pertinent to human development, but were not significant in explaining the differences in countries' performances.

To understand Liberia's dismal human development performance, it would be helpful to explain its circumstances in the context of the relevant endogenous and exogenous variables as discussed above. Liberia is endowed with lucrative natural resources and human capital that compare favorably with other countries that have a relatively higher status of human development. Liberia's population is heterogeneous. It is characterized by: (a) 16 major indigenous ethnic groups; (b) descendants from Africans who were sold by fellow Africans or abducted to serve as slaves in the United States, referred to as "Americo-Liberians" and immigrants from the West Indies and other parts of Africa referred to as "Congo people". While there has been considerable integration of the population through inter-marriages and other social interactions over time rendering the ethnic characteristics less explicitly defined, integration was a major problem in the initial period of Liberia's evolution. One of Liberia's past Presidents, Arthur Barclay, in the early part of the last century, attested to this problem in his statement that:

The Liberian nation is to be made up of the Negro civilized to some extent in the United States and repatriated, and of the aboriginal tribes. At present it is composed of a small number of civilized and a large number of aboriginal communities in varying degrees of dependence. The problem is how to blend these into a national organism, an organic unity (Starr, 1913:144).

Other problems, during the initial stage of statehood included a governing elite many of whom were inexperienced in national leadership or lacked the requisite capacity; severe financial constraints due to the nation's nascent operational resource base; and imperialistic incursions by major European countries that threatened the sovereignty of the state.

The governing elite, in the early period of statehood largely comprised the Americo-Liberians. Later the "Congo people" were amalgamated in the regime. Given their relative small size, homogeneity and cohesion, as well as being the major players in establishing the state as Liberia, this group dominated the political and economic domains of the state's apparatus. For fear of being marginalized and in some cases pure bigotry, the ruling elite maintained an "exclusionary" governance policy. Later this was changed to a "gradual absorptive" policy in which other ethnic groups became part of the ruling elite. Over the years this oligarchic regime became generally known as Congo people. This group has been blamed for every shortcoming of the political system, every failure in public policy and every inequity in the society, irrespective of the complexity of the causes or how recent the emergence of the awareness of or the ability to deal with them (Berg, 1979). What has not been relatively highlighted was the critical role this

group played in safeguarding Liberia's sovereignty and national dignity. The passage below succinctly explains the situation and its ethnic implication.

The emigrant leadership of the 1890 –1930 years was composed of educated politicians, not professionals, technocrats or intellectuals. They had one political objective as a group: to keep Liberia free.

In spite of the “colonial naivety of their minds,” these men took on again and again the British and French and never went down to ignominious defeat. Their greatest triumph would be in the 1930-1935 period when faced with League of Nations' sanctions and almost certain mandation, they adroitly rode out the storm (Liberty, 2002:228).

Liberty also notes that it was due to these eventful trying times that W.E. Burghardt Dubois (1933:683) wrote:

Indeed the record of peace, efficiency and ability made by this little poverty-stricken settlement of the rejected and despised, sitting on the edge of Africa and fighting the world in order to be left alone, is, despite querulous criticism, one of the most heartening efforts of human history (cited in Liberty:229).

Liberty further explains that:

It was this kind of triumph, not any kind of innate feeling of superiority, which jelled emigrant paramountcy determination – the sheer will to survive at all cost – that kept emigrant ethnicity at the apex of the Liberian ethnic pyramid. It was these experiences that created the *esprit de corps* of that stratum in this century that made it reluctant to share power with others who challenged or denigrated the passage through the difficult years (Liberty: 229).

The ruling elite was thus successful in safeguarding the nation's sovereignty, but alienated the majority of the population. Moreover, due to the lack of resources, the complexity of the issues, and the overall capacity deficiencies, the evolving needs for strengthening the human resource base, and other attributes of human development remained largely unrealized. The opportunities for civil society's participation in the nation-building process was also very limited and highly skewed towards those having connections to the ruling elites. In essence, initial investment in the human resource base was rather limited and incomparable with that of Japan and Korea. Moreover, focus on maintaining ethnic cohesion of a minute section of the population fueled dissension and served as a breeding ground for problems that were to emerge later. This explains a brief account of the ethnic factor in Liberia's evolution and impact on human development up to 1950.

During the 1950s and 1960s, as noted earlier, Liberia achieved phenomenal economic growth. This was due largely to the high demand and the attractive world market prices for rubber and iron ore, the country's main export commodities at that time. Unlike Japan and Korea, this growth was not effectively utilized and managed to develop a vibrant human resource base, effective institutional mechanism and strategic structural reforms to adequately serve as a sustainable foundation for enhancing human development. This does not imply that there were no attempts towards this end. There were indeed relative increased educational opportunities, improved health facilities and administrative reforms. What should be implied here are that the results were not forthcoming as the situation deserved and as the people expected.

The situation worsened in the mid and late seventies due to external economic factors, specifically, escalating oil prices and a global recession that culminated in depressed prices and demand for Liberia's export commodities. These exogenous factors led to a deterioration of whatever progress that was previously achieved. Economic growth fell to less than one percent and previous economic and social progress began to dissipate. This in turn led to economic hardships with a disproportional adverse effect falling on those who were not directly responsible for the general situation nor were in the best position to cope with it. The situation set in motion socio-political upheavals fueled by ideologically inspired revolutionaries. Ultimately, the situation led to a military coup and subsequently internecine upheavals and full-fledged civil war. While the explicit causes of the civil war may be due to other multiple causes in addition to those implicitly referred to in this paper, the situation rendered all semblance of governance incapacitated (Barclay, 2000). Thus, Liberia fell into a crisis of unparalleled historical proportion.

During the war (1989-1997) and the period of the regime (1997-mid-2003) that was elected immediately after the war, environmental concerns were heightened. It is reported that gold and diamond mining and the extraction of logs were a major source of financial support for the rebels. Mining activities increased the rural communities vulnerabilities to malaria and various water-borne diseases. The rate of logs extraction raised alarming signals on the rapid depletion of forest reserves and its environmental consequential effects. Regarding logging operations, Hofstatter (2001) notes that:

Liberia will likely have no forest reserves within the next ten years because of the destructive rate at which logs are being extracted. The fact that there is virtually no forest management nor replanting of trees means that the social, economic and ecological impacts of this trade will have severe long term implications for the future of Liberia and its people. The plants and animals species that live in these forests will have their habitats destroyed and may face extinction. Unique and rare species of vegetation and trees are disappearing rapidly (Hofstatter, 2001: 7).

The overall situation as discussed above suggests that the evolution of the circumstances and efforts towards improvement in Liberia's economic and social conditions have been, to a large extent, inimical to the path of sustainable development. Policies and strategic

actions to preserve and enhance the production, distribution and utility of economic, social and natural capital have been relatively ineffective in some cases and non-existent in others. The next section discusses how the institutions of governance may have contributed to the state of unsustainable growth and development.

## **VI. AN INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN LIBERIA**

From the perspective of a socially recognized organization providing a valued service, institutions may be categorized as statal and parastatal organizations, civil society organizations and private sector organizations. The discussion here focuses on the former. At the outset it must be noted that these organizations operate within an overall governance authority of the state. In the Liberian context, the state is constitutionally sanctioned, in terms of governance as having a democratic system of government with three independent branches: the Executive, the Judicial and the Legislative. These branches are to serve as checks and balances in the governance of the state. People are expected to serve in these branches by rules and regulations including free and fair elections for certain positions. The government, through its institutional apparatus, is constitutionally required to ensure an impartial application of the law, a guarantee for responsible and accountable freedom and human rights and the decentralization of political authority and decision-making as well as conditions to facilitate the efficient functioning of markets. It is also required to facilitate the improvement of human development.

In practice, this system of government has been more symbolic than substantive. Multi-party system of government became virtually a one-party system. Elections have rarely been free and fair. The independence of the three branches of government became compromised by the dominance of the Executive Branch in which the presidency became paramount. Other state institutions responsible for economic growth and human development and all of their attributes were severely constrained by the lack of adequately qualified and motivated human resources, unclear internal standards and lately woefully inadequate incentives. The institutions were also plagued by inept management practices and systems that were highly susceptible to political patrimony, arbitrary decision-making and an unpredictable response to crisis situations. In some cases, the appropriate “rules of the game” were in place, but the ability and/or the commitment to consistently and transparently enforce these rules were weak. Thus confidence in the system became virtually paralyzed.

According to a Liberian Presidential Task Force on Policy Adjustment Report (1993:4), some of the major inhibiting factors that have depressed public sector efficiency and outputs were:

- (a) nepotism and corruption in the appointment, promotion and compensation of public servants and officials due to the absence of a set of objective criteria, and enforceable civil service structure and regulations.

- (b) moonlighting, hustling and misuse of public facilities on the part of many public workers in search of means to augment personal disposable income permitted by the absence of clearly defined terms of reference, reporting procedures, performance and evaluation schemes and a public accountability system.
- (c) over-lapped and uncoordinated functions amongst the various ministries and agencies as well as conflicting operational procedures in the implementation of public policies and programs.

Institutions in the civil society, which were actually in an embryonic stage as far as national development pertains, and the private sector were affected by institutional failures in the government's institutional apparatus.

The other aspect of institutions as defined in the context of this paper deals with individual and group behavior and socially sanctioned norms and rules of conduct governing such behavior. It would appear that just as national development was hampered by governance constraints, personal development was also constrained by the lack of internal maturity, emotional strength and the disintegration of principle-centered behavior. While the roots of these behavioral patterns may have some historical roots, the situation in more recent times has become rampant.

The shift into near anarchy during the military coup in 1980 and its reign heightened people's perception of government positions being avenues for the accumulation of fast and vast wealth. This lingering perception is apparently being unwittingly institutionalized. Many officials in the recent political regimes seem to act as if the country were their personal domains with each having institutional and administrative sections as their prized fiefdoms to which they were entitled to exploit for personal gain. Due to weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of political commitment, precise performance standards and an ethical code of conduct, many individuals and groups overstep their limits of authority remorselessly. A code of conduct should have been established as stipulated in the Liberian 1986-revised constitution. According to Article 90 of that constitution:

- a) No person, whether elected or appointed to any public office, shall engage in any other activity, which shall be against public policy or constitute conflict of interest.
- (b) No person holding public office shall demand or receive any other perquisites, emoluments or benefits, directly or indirectly, on account of any duty required by government.
- (c) The Legislature shall, in pursuance of the above provision, prescribe a code of conduct for all public officials and employees, stipulating the acts, which constitute conflict of interest or are against public policy and the penalties for violations (cited in Banks and Woterson, 2003:3-4).

This code of conduct has yet to be established and institutionalized. When this code is established along with effective enforcement mechanisms and capacity, it would serve as

a disincentive to those persons who embrace the belief that the avenue to public jobs that provide opportunities for corruption is a resort to arms. It would also serve as a deterrent to public officials who believe that they can enrich themselves at the expense of the nation and not have to account for such practices (Banks and Woterson 2003).

On the issue of leadership there appeared to be a pattern where many of those in the higher echelon of the political hierarchy received cooperation from their staff and the general public not because these leaders were trusted, respected or honored but rather because they had coercive and utility power as opposed to legitimate power and authority. Coercive power is the creation and use of fear and threats in getting things done. Utility power is characterized by the “what’s in it for me” syndrome. This is basically a situation when people strive to satisfy their bosses or even the public, based on an expectation of rewards. These rewards could be promotion, inclusion in an inner circle, job security or material and pecuniary benefits. Their services are therefore not necessarily based on principles or the objectives of the organization. Under such leadership there is abundance of lip service loyalty and superficial commitment (Covey, 1991). Generally, this situation did not provide an enabling environment for sustainability.

While there were notable exceptions, many of Liberia’s institutional leaders during the last two decades fell into the above category. There is a now glaring need to focus on getting things accomplished through enthusiastic cooperation based on the institutional heads’ character, competence, motivational attributes and genuine commitment to a principle-centered cause or objective. This is what characterizes legitimate power and authority.

From the discussion above one may conclude that while Liberia is endowed with considerable mineral resources, fertile land, and human capital, albeit less than adequate, the institutional capacity necessary to further develop, deploy, and utilize these resources has been lacking. These institutional failures, in many cases, served as disincentives for stimulating innovation, production and investment. They adversely affected the development and efficient functioning of a market economy and contributed to continued over-reliance on the production and export of raw materials as the economy’s impetus for growth. They also adversely affected the nurturing of democratic practices, personal integrity, principle-centered leadership and other virtues of human dignity. Instead, it provided incentives for corruption, social and economic dishonesty and other unscrupulous anti-social norms. These vices and misguided policies generated partly by institutional failures became pervasive and were apparently virtually institutionalized, albeit informally. This situation immensely contributed to unsustainable growth and development that ultimately resulted in Liberia’s downward spiral to its current state of calamitous socioeconomic decline, political instability and recurring civil wars.

## **VII. TOWARDS AN EVOLVING INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

To develop a meaningful framework for sustainable development from an institutional perspective in the context of Liberia and countries facing similar circumstances, it may be necessary to begin from a conceptual basis. This section provides only preliminary insights. These insights should be followed by in-depth empirical studies and institutional analysis upon which more substantive elements may be added to ensure a strategic action and results orientation.

As indicated in the discussion, Liberia currently faces a desperate situation and enormous challenges. This framework is intended not to facilitate recovery and rehabilitation since this would mean putting Liberia on a path to its pre-war conditions, factors of which contributed to the current situation. Notwithstanding, one must consider the need to address the immediate security issues but with a view to placing Liberia along a sustainable development path. The framework should therefore be structured to reflect emphasis on substantive innovative institutional reforms that would serve as sustainable preventive and remedial measures to institutional failures rather than focusing support for the violent removal of personalities.

The organizing principles of the framework are that it must reflect an holistic view of the sustainable development process as well as the various sectoral issues relevant to political, economic, social and environmental concerns. It must also reflect a comprehensive geographic coverage, specific domains for intervention, broad-based participatory mechanism and alternative sources of national-ownership-assured support. It must be user friendly for identifying and analyzing critical issues, assessing strengths and needs, formulating and implementing policies, identifying who should do what and why as well as monitoring, evaluating and facilitating responsible follow-up actions.

The framework should have several components to address specific concerns related to improving governance institutional performance. First it should have mechanisms through which institutions acquire values and stability. Values should reflect socially accepted norms relevant to enhancing integrity, justice, accountability and competence. Stability should reflect, not necessarily maintenance of the status quo, but rather the capacity to adapt to changing socioeconomic circumstances without losing sight of the national development objectives. Other components should include: (a) constitutional reforms to minimize and control, but not to incapacitate the authority of the presidency; and (b) capacity building. The capacity building component should be comprehensive involving education, skills development, systems management, organizational structures, procedures and processes, performance management, motivation, teamwork and leadership. It should have an incentive system review mechanism and other factors relevant to facilitate the retention and effective utility of the existing and built capacity. It should also involve, with special emphasis, personal development stressing character strengthening, moral responsibility awareness and attitudinal changes to stimulate and

enhance conformity with constitutional and socially sanctioned norms. The framework must ensure that enforcement mechanism, characterized by fair and transparent punitive measures, must be institutionalized and applied without discrimination. Finally the framework should embrace Balogun's four pillars of agency governance: (1) the role of civil society in holding public agencies to account; (2) the pattern in the exercise of political power; (3) the professional and ethical basis of managerial/leadership authority; and (4) the credibility of the prevailing rules regime.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The concept, sustainable development is now widely used in the development literature, national and organizational strategic plans and political speeches. It has been interpreted to mean different things for different purposes. This paper has discussed the concept with a view to providing an operational perception and to explore its relevance and applicability to improving human development now and in the future.

Using Liberia as a case study, the paper attempted to illuminate Liberia's socio-economic retrogression and the possible relevance of the sustainable development concept to its recovery. The intended recovery is perceived to be not to the country's previous status, but along a sustainable development path with a view to improving human development.

The concept is considered most relevant when couched in a governance context from an institutional perspective. From this view, it is asserted that institutional failures contributed to the current state of the country's socio-economic development. Recognizing the inherent interplay of power politics and the personal dynamics of the political economy, the paper provided brief preliminary insights on an institutional sustainable development framework. In addition to the traditional organizational reform measures and institutional performance mechanisms, the paper suggested the pursuit for innovations that would ensure the effective implementation of appropriate strategies for inculcating a value system, promoting institutional stability, and undertaking constitutional reforms and capacity building programs for institutional strengthening. It further suggested that capacity building should place a special focus on personal development. This is considered important so that progress and achievement may be realized not by the personalization of the issues, but rather by individual and groups' character, competence and genuine commitment. This would be a people-centered approach to institutional development.

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## ACBF WORKING PAPER SERIES

**Overview:** The ACBF Working Paper Series (AWPS) was launched in October 2004 as one of the instruments for disseminating findings of ongoing research and policy analysis works designed to stimulate discussion and elicit comments on issues relating to capacity building and development management in Africa. A product of the Knowledge Management and Program Support Department of the African Capacity Building Foundation, a Working Paper very often ends up as an Occasional Paper, a book or some other form of publication produced by the Foundation after a thorough review of its contents. It offers a means by which the Foundation seeks to highlight lessons of experience, best practices, pitfalls and new thinking in strategies, policies and programs in the field of capacity building based on its operations and those of other institutions with capacity building mandates. AWPS also addresses substantive development issues that fall within the remit of the Foundation's six core competence areas as well as the role and contribution of knowledge management in the development process.

**Objectives:** AWPS is published with a view to achieving a couple of objectives. Fundamental among these are the following:

- To bridge knowledge gaps in the field of capacity building and development management within the African context.
- To provide analytical rigor and experiential content to issues in capacity building and the management of development in Africa.
- To highlight best practices and document pitfalls in capacity building, the design, implementation and management of development policies and programs in Africa.
- To systematically review, critique and add value to strategies, policies and programs for national and regional economic development, bringing to the fore pressing development issues and exploring means for resolving them.

**Focus:** AWPS focuses on capacity building and development management issues. These are in the following areas:

- Capacity building issues in the following six core competence areas and their relevance to development management in Africa:
  - *Economic Policy Analysis and Development Management.*
  - *Financial Management and Accountability.*
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  - *Public Administration and Management.*
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- Engendering of development
- Development challenges, which include issues in poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS, governance, conflict prevention and management, human capital flight, private sector development, trade, regional corporation and integration, external debt management, and globalization, among others.

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