

## **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**Stephen O. Aigbonoga, Ph.D**

**&**

**Kingsley C. Solomon, Ph.D**

Department of Philosophy/Religion and Cultural Studies  
Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike  
[excelstev01@yahoo.com](mailto:excelstev01@yahoo.com); [excelstev01@yahoo.com](mailto:excelstev01@yahoo.com)

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31621.83688

### **Abstract**

This paper examines Karl Marx's theory of dialectical materialism and its implications for sustainable development. Dialectical materialism is a way of understanding reality; whether thoughts, emotions, or the material world. The term development connotes implicitly the transformation of the society economically, politically, and socially such that the inhabitants of a particular enclave have substantially improved welfare and living conditions. The traditional view of development is centered on high gross domestic product, gross national product, per capita income and high level of industrialisation. The aim of the study is to extrapolate the values of dialectical materialism in the explanation of sustainable development as a human centered concept. Through the application of the method of critical analysis of textual and relevant materials, the paper reveals that for development to be truly sustainable it has to be centered on the progressive interest of the people. Since dialectical materialism tends to examine the material cum ideological phenomenon of human existence, enduring development becomes a pivot and the root of human existence. It shows also, the process of social transformation in human society. In an attempt to articulate enduring process of sustainable development, Marxian theory of dialectical materialism is then recommended to serve as a nexus and explanatory model for human centered development in the society.

**Keywords:** Dialectical Materialism, Sustainable Development, Human Society, sustained welfare

### **Introduction**

The birth pangs of historical epochs is fully expressed in mans' seemingly "well-won ruts left by our mundane, taken-for-granted assumptions" (Lawhead 8-9). The concept of development is one of such assumptions. Over the years, historians, sociologists, economists, and developmental theorists have tried to ascribe to development a non-human characteristic, thereby disavowing people as the true rationale for development. The traditional view of development has seen development being measured by per capita income, gross domestic product (GDP), gross national product (GNP), growth, infrastructural development, scientific advancement, industrialisation, etc. (Aigbonoga 351). This work is an attempt to conceptualise development on human existence viz-a-viz the phenomenon around him.

The theory of dialectical materialism is at the root of human existence because it presents, describes and explains human, social, economic and political condition in the society. Marx's vision of history and society began as a young university student when he first encountered George Hegel's ideas. Hegel's philosophy taught that human history has meaning and purpose, that it is a

rational, determined, evolutionary process in which each stage encounters tensions and contradictions that cause it to change and bring forth a new form of social, cultural, and political organisation (Lawhead 596). While Hegel's fans and admirers interpreted this to mean that the present stage of history was thoroughly rationally inevitable (some sorts of conservative interpretation), Marx and Engels saw Hegel's philosophy as leading in a more radical direction. They believed that the present society will inevitably be destroyed and give way to a better, more rational social structure. It was their goal to move history along to its final, rational stage through practical action (Lawhead 596). Enthused with this historical explanations, Marx moved to give adequate explanation to the economic order which determines the material and social conditions of man in the society.

Marx sought to completely explain what is responsible for the social and economic behaviour of man in the society. This he found to be strongly rooted in the economic conditions of man in the society. Economics, for Marx rules everything including man's ideology. By this, Marx meant that the characterization of economics as a fundamental driving force in the behaviour of man could provide adequate explanation to human history.

Man is by nature a social and political being who seeks relation, cooperation and integration from his fellow men in the bid to create sustainable and meaningful existence. The economic and political survival of man is clearly rooted on the basis of this cooperation. However, as society develops, this social cooperation results in class struggles and social conflicts. For Heraclitus, conflict is the basis of progress and condition of life in human society. "...there is also perpetual conflict, and perpetual strife, for the universe is a universe made up of conflict and clashes of opposites. Conflict is the very condition of life; it is through conflict that things come into being and remain in existence. The system of the universe is that of conflict of opposites" (Omoregbe 11). This implies that the progress and development of the society could be retarded if there is an end to conflict and strife. On this trajectory, Marx conceptualised the progress and development of the society through historical inevitability of class antagonism and fusion of opposites in a dialectical movement. This is implicational for sustainable development. This study, therefore, is aimed at extrapolating the values of dialectical materialism in the explanation of sustainable development as a human centered concept. In other to build a coherent system of thought and explanatory model with respect to human progress in the society, and since development is so tied to human existence, the material cum economic requirements that drive or foster development must constantly and closely be examined. As a theoretical framework, dialectical materialism is so relevant to the contemporary discourse in sustainable developmental issues.

### **Karl Marx and the Origin of Dialectical Materialism**

Karl Marx was born to a Jewish lawyer in 1818. He was thus raised as a protestant by his Lutheran father (though Jewish, Marx father converted to Lutheranism which was politically necessary for survival in that period). Marx who was enrolled in the university to become a lawyer would soon abandoned this ambition for philosophy. This change of mind was necessitated by his encounter with a political radical group known as Young Hegelians. Marx became deeply absorbed in Hegel's philosophy and the activities of the group. Hegel's doctrine of dialectics is hinged on his philosophy of idealism.

Hegel's philosophy of dialectics taught that thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis is an idealistic formula for the explanation of societal changes. Wheat (2004) explains that Hegelian dialectics revolves around three progressive stages of development: (1) a thesis, which is an idea or concept, (2) an

anti-thesis, an optional idea that contradicts the thesis, and (3) a synthesis, a climatic idea that somehow combines the thesis and the antithesis, or the best parts of them, into a sort of compromise, reconciliation, or previously unperceived identity (13). However, Marx encounter with Ludwig Feuerbach made him to reject idealism of Hegel and embraced Feuerbach materialism and his own theory of history as the outworking of economic factors (Moore and Bruder 290). Feuerbach, who started out as a Hegelian, criticised idealism on the basis of its abstract contemplation. According to him, "whoever maintains that mind is prior to matter is simply a theologian in disguise who seeks to deduce the objective world from some immaterial power, or the idea. To try, said Feuerbach, to deduce the objective world from one's idea is to show that one understands exactly nothing about nature or about mind. The idealistic starting point is a false one" (Wright n.pag). Following Feuerbach threshold, Marx thus gave a materialistic interpretation of history and its dialectical implications for human society.

### **Marx Sub-structure and Man's participation in Historical Process**

Marx view of an ideal society is closely connected to his discourses on means of production and production relations. For him, an ideal society has no economic classes, no wages, no money, no private property, and no exploitation. Each person will not only be provided a fully adequate material existence, but will also be given the opportunity to develop freely and completely all physical and mental faculties (Moore and Bruder 289-290). Historically, for Marx, the society has progressed dialectically from one stage to another i.e. from the primitive slave society to feudal society. The feudal society gave way to capitalist society, while capitalism produces socialism which is the first stage of communism. The last stage of society's development, according to Marx, is communism, a classless and stateless society. This historical process of societal development is evidently driven by man.

The substructure which is the economic realm, according to Marxists, is the interplay of the means of production versus production relations intensely driven by the struggle between the bourgeois (owners of means of production) and the proletariat (workers). Along with Aristotle, Marx believed that man is a social animal who does nothing but seeks relation amongst his fellow men. In the drive to satisfy his physical and material needs, man develops the means or forces of production. The utilisation of any set of means of production leads to fresh needs and therefore to further means of production (Moore and Bruder 291). Here lies the ambivalence of Marx's dialectics, hence his notion of production configuration.

Marx defines capital as anything that constitutes economic wealth in that it has exchange value. Here, Marx was heavily influenced by Lockean labour theory of value. John Locke, a contractarian, studied the dynamic phenomenon of the value of human labour in the transformation of an object from its natural state to a finished product. For Locke, object in its natural state has intrinsic value. Intrinsic value is the primary composite and a fundamental characteristics of an object. Extrinsic value of an object is derived when labour is mixed with an object. This, for Locke, is the origin of private property and equally established the right to own such property without interference from the government. To this end, Locke contends that although all people equally have a right to property, they do not all have a right to equal property because how much property a person lawfully has will depend on his ingenuity and industriousness. This distinction is important because it can go some way toward justifying an unequal distribution of wealth (Moore and Bruder 278). Upon this trajectory, Marx conceptualised his discourse of capitalism viz-a-viz with production configuration and production relations.

Marx sees capitalism as a system which will eventually undermine itself and lead to communism. This is because the forces of production are owned and controlled by a small class of people as their private property, and employ workers who have no economic resources but their own labour power. Adhering to the Smithian labour theory of value, Marx argues that surplus value belongs to the proletariat as of right. Instead of ploughing back the profit or using parts of it to uplift the working conditions of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie expropriates the surplus value. By using the surplus value in an exploitative and capricious manner, “the capitalist becomes vampire, villain and parasite” (Jakpor 21). This is an inherent contradiction in capitalism i.e., the motive of profit making at the detriment of the workers' welfare. The condition of man in a capitalist system is thus explained by Marx along this trajectory.

The expropriation of surplus value in the capitalist system creates and deepens the class struggles and other social contradictions. The class struggles and social contradictions in the capitalist system lead to the emergence of class-consciousness. Through this, the worker becomes aware of his position in the productive configuration. Consequent upon the exploitative nature and inhuman treatments under the capitalist system, the worker is inevitably driven into alienation. As such, the condition of man becomes degenerated into a state of servitude. This state of servitude is an undesirable condition of the worker under capitalism, because the more wealth the worker produces the poorer he becomes. The result of increased productivity for the worker is his devaluation since he produces through his labour power what belongs to others. Both labour and products are as alien things that dominate them (Moore and Bruder 293). Hence, man is alienated from his products, from himself, his fellow human beings and from nature or society. This condition is antithetical to man's development and sustainability.

### **Ontological Conceptualisation of Sustainable Development**

Development underpins ontological characterisation of cosmos. This means that development is a necessary consequence of cosmic motion. Nature is ontologically in motion. Since nothing is static in nature, all nature is undoubtedly in internal and external motion. The end product of this internal and external motion is progress. The term progress is loosely interpreted to mean development, a positive movement or improvement of the society. The sustainability of this process encapsulates the focal point of this work.

Sustainable development is seen as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Cunningham 28). Cunningham sees sustainable development as progress in human well-being that can be extended or prolonged over many generations rather than just a few years. Accordingly, Marx's dialectical materialism underscores ontological paradigms of development. Marx described the condition of man in industrial society with the word “alienation” and argues that “the starting point of the study of humanity must be 'real man', living in the 'real material' world (Giddens 35). This is why he opines that the fundamental driving force in human behaviour and history is economics.

Meeting the basic human needs such as food, clothes and shelter defines man's root of economic behaviour and thus guarantees human survival. Since dialectical materialism accounts for man's economic behaviour in the society, it explains the progressive movement and development of the society from the crude stage to a developed stage. From the primitive slave society to feudal society, capitalist to socialist and then communist society, economic forces such as production forces as well as production relations have shaped and still continue to shape the course of human history. This process underscores the progress and development of the society towards human fulfilment.

### **Development as Social Transformation**

Social transformation implies a fundamental change in society, which can be contrasted with social change viewed as gradual or incremental changes over a period of time (Khondker 1). To put it succinctly, social transformation implies a pragmatic move or shift from a lower levels of production to higher levels of production in relation to the forces of production. Cultural and institutional changes and human progress benchmarked the concept of social change. Along this line, social change can be gleaned from the productive and pragmatic effects of cultural innovations and institutional changes in the society, and how it affects man. It means that societies experience social transformations when they grow into industrialised developed countries.

Rostow in his *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1962) presented societal transformation through an evolutionary approach manifesting in five stages of growth. Rostow identifies the stages as traditional society, the precondition for take-off, take off stage, stage of maturity, and the age of mass consumption. This Rostow's theory of growth has come to be regarded as a classical exposition of modernisation theory of development. Modernisation theory, which subsequently assumed the center stage of development literature, is a "process whereby societies or social institutions change or move from traditional or less developed ones to those that characterise developed ones" (Offiong 20). Offiong further argued that modernisation is the institutional and cultural accompaniment of growth. Here, it is important to point out that development cannot be equated or used interchangeably with growth. In development literature, there is a clear distinction between development and growth. While growth is determined by economic indexes such as high Per Capita Income, Gross National Product (GNP), Gross Domestic Product (GDP), scientific advancement, industrialisation, etc. development on the other hand has to do with sustained human welfare. Economic growth simply refers to increase of per capita, gross domestic product (GDP) or other measure of aggregate income. It is often measured as the rate of change in real GDP. Economic growth refers only to the quality of goods and services produced in a given environment at a particular time (Aiya & Anetekhai 145). For Ake, development is not economic growth even though economic growth in large determines its possibility. Real economic growth is a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition for development (Efemini 33). Indeed, countries of the periphery, according to Rostow, who desire to move from the traditional level of development to the level of mass consumption must pay serious attention to economic indexes that drive growth.

Heraclitus presents a different but revolutionary idea of social change. His notion of social change is hinged on conflict as a system of evolutionary progressive social transformation. Heraclitus theory of change focuses on the fusion of opposites as a rational explanation for progressive movement in the society. The reconciliation of the opposites result in societal progress. This is central to Hegel's philosophy of dialectics. Hegel has argued that "Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity" (Smith, 1989, p. 107). It is very clear, in Hegel's view that conflict is a natural phenomenon, good for generating understanding, creating progress and sustainable development. When properly managed, conflict serves as a social catalyst which engenders healthy relationship in the society.

### **Sustainable Development and Human Well Being**

Harrison sees development as the improvement in human wellbeing. What brings about development, according to Harrison, is our ability to imagine, theorise, conceptualise, experiment, invent, articulate, organise, manage, solve problems and do a hundred other things with our minds

and hands that contribute to the progress of the individual and of humankind (Harrison 227). Claude Ake, in conceptualising development, sees people as rationale and focal point of development. Hence, he argued that development is not a project but a process. Development, for him, is the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their life circumstances to realise higher levels of civilisation in accordance with their own choice and values (Ake 125). Sustainable development is driven by the people's willingness and capacities to channel their energies into production. This creative capability in man shows that man is essentially a labourer. It is Ake's position that man is above all else a worker or a labourer. Work is the primary condition of his existence (Ake 9). The necessity to adequately care for the welfare of the labourer who offers his labour and his creative capacity in production process is hereby insinuated, hence the exculpatory ambience of dialectical materialism.

Marxian dialectical materialism accentuate the importance of labour in production configuration and the existed relationship between the owner of factors of production and the man who offers his labour in the factory. The Marxian emphasis is on the existential condition of man in the society. The epicenter of this emphasis is the need for the labourer to have an improved welfare commensurate with the amount of labour he offers in production process. This will enable man, through his labour, to attain the conditions listed in the United Nations Development Programme report such as;

- a) Attainment of long and quality life
- b) Access to quality education
- c) Access to decent housing
- d) Access to resources needed for standard of living (1).

The attainment of these conditions will transmute or lead to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Declaration such as;

- 1) Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger
- 2) Attainment of universal primary education
- 3) To reduce child mortality
- 4) To improve maternal health
- 5) To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- 6) To ensure environmental sustainability
- 7) To develop a global partnership for development

From the foregoing, it could be reasoned that man through his labour recreates himself by producing his own sustainability. However, dialectical materialism reveals how the attitude of the bourgeoisie impedes the disposition of the labourer which directly affects his sustainability. The reality of alienation draws attention to the diminutive condition of man in an unjust set up. The whims and caprices of the capitalist system inevitably leads to alienation. With this, the condition of human existence becomes bizarre and unassailable as man grapples with the reality of survival through self-sustainability. Alienation build in man unsustainable consciousness of unleashing his creative capacities which further devalues his essence.

More so, sustainable development is deeply connected to the protection and preservation of human rights, which is the anchor of dialectical materialism. The protection of human rights guarantee human freedom and thus affords man the possibility to freely make choices in

production configuration. This freedom to freely decide what to and how to produce which enables man to unleash his creative potentials is what drives sustainable development. Akhigbe and Tijani (2016) observe that the modern understanding of development emphasises, aside economic development, human rights values. This is because, according to them, human rights are essential to determining what types of development are needed and beneficial (213). It is their argument that rights-based approach to development enhances respect, protection, promotion and fulfilment of human rights in development discourse. This approach maintains that human rights values precipitate and facilitate development processes, effectiveness and outcomes (Akhigbe & Tijani 214). This deeply underpins the nexus between dialectical materialism and sustainable development. Dialectical materialism set the tune for sustainable developmental discourse through its anchor or insistence on the sustained economic conditions of the workers who bear the brute of production. Issues of human rights and the protection of human dignity benchmark development. The right to fair and just wage, the right to fair treatment of the workers in other to avoid sliding into alienation ontologically underpins development.

More so, sustainable development climax in self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-sustainability. In conceptualising self-reliance, Aiyegbusi opines that:

Self-reliance implies the capability and capacity of a nation or of a group of nations acting collectively to initiate and implement autonomous decisions in various walks of life: the capability and capacity of a nation or of a group of nations acting collectively to provide over time a greater part of the needs of its or their peoples whether in terms of factors of production or of final goods and services (xiv).

The above passage suggests that self-independence in choosing the developmental project to pursue by the people is a key to achieving sustainable development. It implies that individuals and communities define and pursue their own development according to their needs, values and aspirations. Self-reliance does not in any sense suggest self-isolation. The philosophy that underpins self-reliance is predicated on the need to project aspirations and to develop the creative energy to realise such aspirations under a fair, just and equitable system occasioned by a well-structured educational system.

### **Conclusion**

Having looked through the lens of dialectical materialism as an explanatory model for sustainable development, it is observed that there is a strong link between dialectical materialism and sustainable development. Dialectical materialism insistence on the sustained welfare of the people set the tune for sustainable development discourse.

The basic needs of the people, especially in developing countries, are essentially food, shelter, clothing, jobs, etc. In developing countries, these basic needs, and the earnest aspirations of the people for better life and welfare are not met. The logic of sustainable development lies in meeting human basic needs and providing them the platform to meet their legitimate aspirations. Alienation and debasement of the workers raise a further serious issue for sustainable development agents. The factors inimical to the realisation of human sustained welfare are x-rayed by dialectical materialism to be man-made and a direct orchestration of the whims and caprices of the capitalists. The expropriation of surplus value meant reduction of workers' wages and negatively impacted on their welfare.

This paper suggests the centrality of the peoples' welfare in development plans. Since in developmental process the people create and recreate themselves, the options in development should be thrown open, and the human mind that selects this development options should be trained, through a well-structured educational system to contemplate the development that serves the interest of the generality of the people.

### References

- Ake, C. Democracy and Development in Africa. Ibadan: Spectrum, 2001. Print.
- Akhigbe, E. & Tijani, A. A. "Human Rights as a Veritable Tool for Sustainable Development: Embracing the Trend in Nigeria". *Journal of Strategic & Development Studies* 1.1 (2016): 210-221. Print.
- Aigbonoga, Stephen O. "Gene Sharps' Concept of Nonviolence Struggle: A Recipe for Nigeria's Developmental Problems". *Journal of Strategic & Development Studies* 1.1 (2016): 346-355. Print.
- Aiya, Fidelis & Anetekhai, John A. Anani. "Strategies for Sustainable Development in Contemporary Economy of Nigeria". In *Journal of Strategic & Development Studies* 1.1 (2016): 140-151. Print.
- Aiyegbusi "Farward: The Genesis and Goals of Lagos Plan of Action". In Luke, David F. and Shaw, Timothy M. (eds), *Continental Crisis: The Lagos Plan of Action and Africa's Future*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1984. Print.
- Bruder, K. & Moore, B. N. *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Co. Inc., 2002. Print.
- Cunningham, W. Siago, B. *Environmental Science: A Global Concern* (9th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Co. Inc., 2007. Print.
- Efemini, A. *Claude Ake's philosophy of development: Implications for Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, Ltd., 2003. Print.
- Giddens, A. "Capitalism and Modern Social Theory". In *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1971. Print.
- Harrison, L. E. (2008). *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind*. In Ayia, Fidelis & Anetekhai, John A. Anani (2016). *Strategies for Sustainable Development in Contemporary Economy of Nigeria*, 2016. In *Journal of Strategic & Development Studies* 1.1 (2016): 140-151. Print.
- Jakpor, O. J. *Some Thought in Marxism*. Ekpoma: Innoh Print, 2002. Print.
- Khondker, Habibul H. *Social Transformation, Development and Globalization*. UAE: Zayed University Press, 2014. Print.
- Lawhead, F. William. *The Philosophical Journey: An Interactive Approach* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Co. Inc., 2003. Print.
- Offiong, D. A. *Imperialism and Dependency*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, (2002).
- Omoregbe, J. *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy*. Vol.1. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd., 1993. Print.
- Rostow, W. W. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge University Press. 1971. Print.
- Smith, S. B. *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context*. London: University of Chicago Press, Ltd., (1989). Print.
- UNDP, (1990). *Human Development Report, 1990*. United Nations Development Programme.