

TOWARD A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE IDEAL OF SUSTAINABILITY

Cesar Cuello Nieto, Fundacion Neotropica

The concept of sustainable development has evolved considerably since first arising during the 1980s. The different currents of social, political, economic and ecological thinking, as described earlier, have been isolated efforts to define the content and scope of the notion of sustainability, each from its distinct perspective. Nevertheless, these efforts have not led to an integrated, holistic conception of sustainability capable of incorporating in one sole vision all of the social relations, the human-nature relation, and all of the axiological and ideological suprastructure that supports such a vision. On certain occasions, as in neoclassical theory, sustainability is simply an appendix to the old conceptual tenets of the predominant economic model, used at the level of discourse but incapable of stimulating a true practice of sustainability.

Understood in a holistic form, sustainability is a complex and multifaceted vision of development. It is a multidimensional model of development which limits economic growth and other human activities to the capacity of nature for self-regeneration, places the improvement of the human condition (social and human development) as its primary goal, and places respect for environmental quality and the limits of nature at the core of any economic, political, educational, and cultural strategy.

Development should be based on equality in order to be compatible with the principles of a holistic understanding of sustainability, which implies that poverty, underdevelopment and political deprivation, as well as wealth and opulence as its antithesis stand in a causal relationship with environmental degradation (Raskin, 1993)

This is a qualitatively different kind of development; a development intended to sustain life, the human condition and values, and the balance of the systems of nature. This holistic idea of development as a process that really could be sustainable is a challenge not only to the traditional conception of development

mentioned above, but also to those understandings of sustainable development which proclaim change while leaving untouched the basic structures of the present model of industrial society.

This new idea of sustainable development as a holistic vision implies fundamental changes at all levels of social, economic, political, and cultural structures, which means a fundamental restructuring of present society. Within this context, sustainable development is that development which allows us to meet the needs and aspirations of both present and future generations always in a concrete social-historic and environmental context without undermining the capacity of nature and cultures for self-regeneration, while giving special attention to the eradication of poverty, social injustice, and inequalities in the relations among nations.

This understanding of sustainable development implies respect for the integrity of nature and for the needs and rights of present and future generations. It implies the rejection of the current blind pursuit of unqualified growth, which is the driving force behind most environmental destruction (Capra, 1991).

In a truly sustainable society, capital accumulation can no longer be the first priority of social production. Understood this way, sustainable development requires us to redefine all the principles of industrialization, agricultural production, urbanization, etc., that have given form to the present unsustainable technological civilization.

This holistic idea of sustainable development does not suggest a return to the pre-modern technology stage nor the stagnation of society. However, the way of life based on an absurdly "diverse" set of the same old technological gadgets must be changed. In this sense, it is a challenge to our current irresponsible and decrepit way of living and dealing with nature. In order to achieve such a transformation, a high level of conscience will be needed, alongwith a definite and determined ecological and humanistic commitment.

Compliance with this commitment is inextricably linked to the observation of certain basic principles of sustainability as a holistic vision, which will now be presented.

Some basic principles for a holistic approach to sustainable development

The formation of a holistic vision of sustainable development requires the structuring of a set of basic principles to serve as its foundation. Some of these principles are described here, although it is not an exhaustive list. Neither, of course, does this proposal assume the absolute validity of any one of these principles.

—For sustainable development to take place, there must be interaction and coordination among all of the factors and agents which intervene and act in a locality, region, or country. Viewed in this manner, sustainable development requires a redefinition of power relations in decision-making among all of the agents acting in the development process: the public and private sectors, international organisms and agencies, local communities, etc. This means that a new combination of efforts is required, which takes into account the interests, values, ways of thinking, experiences, skills, etc., of all of these agents.

—Sustainable development requires, in addition, a redefinition of the predominant patterns of distribution of wealth, in such a manner that more equitable forms are adopted, which permit the satisfaction of the necessities of all persons, and particularly of the most disadvantaged. This implies the elimination of all unjust, illegal, and abusive forms of production and distribution of wealth, which produce and reproduce inequality and poverty among people all around the world.

—Sustainable development requires a redefinition of the relationship between human beings and nature, implying a change in the values which have until now governed this relationship. In this sense, it is necessary to cease to view nature and its resources as unlimited. It is also necessary to stop seeing nature's purpose as a function of human effort. The objects of nature did not arise from or for humans; they have a purpose that transcends human existence. In consequence, it is necessary to overcome the anthropocentric conception that has, for millennia guided the relationship between human beings and nature, supplanting it with a universalistic conception in which all biotic and abiotic factors of the universe are integrated in a totality of interconnected and interdependent elements.

—Sustainable development requires the recognition of inter-generational equality, which implies the assumption, as an ethical imperative of respect not only for the right of present generations to a healthy environment, but also the right of future generations to inherit from present generations a healthy and ecologically balanced environment (Raskin, 1993). *This signifies that productive systems should not damage the environment's integrity and regenerative capacity.*

—Sustainable development requires the establishment of a new international order, which implies a more just redistribution of global wealth and opportunities, and a greater equity in relations between nations (Raskin, 1993).

—Sustainable development is possible only if the limits of nature's capacity for regeneration are respected. This principle implies a necessary reduction of economic growth to within nature's limits and capacity for self-regeneration. Thus, to achieve ecological sustainability, respect for the limits of nature should become a moral obligation and a responsibility of all human beings (International Union, 1989).

—Sustainable development requires that communities be self-sufficient, that people's control over their own lives be increased, and that the social and cultural identity and decision-making capacities of communities be maintained and strengthened (International Union, 1989).

—As a holistic process, sustainable development requires an indissoluble dialectic union between theory and practice. This, in turn, implies a dynamic process undergoing constant evolution and refinement.

THE ETHICAL SUBSTRATE OF SUSTAINABILITY AS A HOLISTIC VISION

As a holistic and integrative vision, sustainable development cannot be based on the same unilateral and reductionist ethical conceptions that have justified the current development model. On the contrary, its ethical substrate must also be universalist and integrating.

Thus, the common assumption implicit in all the actions and changes needed for achieving sustainable development in its holistic meaning is

responsibility. Responsibility is the new human dimension that all human beings have to assume and cultivate if the present crossroads of human and natural existence is to be successfully traversed. Sustainable development is the only responsible way of responding to the present crisis of sustainability.

The extraordinary power of modern human activity and its enormous capacity to affect life and the environment has put a growing challenge to the traditional ethical principles on which technological and scientific development have been based. The old utilitarianism from which the present technological pragmatism has derived, as well as traditional deontological theory, have revealed themselves as insufficient for improving the human condition and the quality of the natural environment. The widened scope of human power as it breaches the horizon of our spatiotemporal neighborhood also breaks down the anthropocentric monopoly of most former ethical, religious, and secular systems (Jonas, 1982, pp. 893-894).

Prior to the present technological era human action had not gone beyond the limits of a person-to-person interaction; it did not have the power and the capacity of trespassing the frontiers of people's everyday life. As a consequence, ethical principles were also focused on these limited person-to-person relationships.

Referring to the magnitude of the changes introduced by technological development during the last decades, M. G. K. Menon, President of the International Council of Scientific Unions, stated the following:

In its living and developing process humankind has modified the natural environment for at least 2 million years, but during the major part of this period human influence on the natural environment has been of local scale and of small magnitude. It has been only in the last half of this century when humankind acquired the capacity to modify the natural environment at a global scale (Menon, 1993, p. 60).

Currently, with the possibilities of modern technology, according to Hans Jonas, the whole biosphere of the planet, with all its plenitude of species, newly revealed in its vulnerability to humans' excessive intervention, claims its share of

the respect owed to all that is an end in itself—that is, to all that is alive. In the view of Jonas, the monopoly of humans on ethical regard is breached precisely with their acquiring a near-monopolistic power over the rest of life. As a major planetary force, humans cannot think of themselves alone anymore (Jonas, 1982, p. 894).

Modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects, and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them. No previous ethics had to consider the global condition of human life and the far-off future, even existence, of the race. These now being an issue demands a new conception of duties and rights, for which previous ethics and metaphysics provide not even the principles, let alone a ready doctrine (Jonas, 1984, pp. 6 and 8).

In order for a human to be ethically responsible, good, or correct, the doing of one's duty or the achievement of certain favorable consequences is not sufficient for an agent; nor is its profitability, utility, or its capacity to generate new jobs sufficient. At this level of awareness of the scope of human actions, economic "progress" that degrades the environment and damages human life is an irresponsible action and cannot be considered as real progress.

Responsibility has become the fundamental ethical imperative in modern civilization, and it should be an unavoidable criterion to assess and evaluate human actions, including, in a special way, development activities. Human beings have the responsibility and the moral obligation not only to preserve their present and future existence but also the existence of all living species on the planet. "Thus it comes about that technology, this coldly pragmatic work of human cunning, installs man in a role which only religion has sometimes assigned to him: that of steward or guardian of creation" (Jonas, 1982).

The displacement of responsibility to the center of ethical stage where it was not before has opened a new chapter in the history of ethics that reflects the new magnitudes of power with which ethics has henceforth to cope: the claims on responsibility grow proportionately with the deeds of power (Jonas, 1982).

Responsibility is not just one more burden for the human being; it is a human dimension that defines our dignity and humaneness (Ramirez, 1990). According to Carl Mitcham, the responsible citizen is very different from a person who simply does his or her duty or is merely effective. Thus, to measure a person by the standards of responsibility, Mitcham says, is also different from measuring someone by the standards of deontology or utility (Mitcham, 1987, p. 27).

The person who performs his or her duty is focused, single-minded, sticks to the prescribed path. The useful or effective person knows how to get things done, can adjust action in order to maximize goods or products. The responsible individual, by contrast, takes all things into account. And this almost always means being conscious of a wider range of factors than the person of duty or of utility (Mitcham, 1987, p. 27).

Thus, in relation to environmental issues, a responsible action calls for "multilateralism." The unilateralism that has predominated in human-nature relationships has been precisely an expression of the values of individualism, utilitarianism, anthropocentrism, profitability, economic efficiency, that have overwhelmed human culture in the last two hundred years.

The new ethical values for a holistic conception of sustainability must now be respect for the integrity of the environment and all its life forms and vital support systems; respect for the planet's cultural diversity and human dignity and integrity; and equality and solidarity between persons, people and continents.

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