



and lack an ethical dimension, have failed to deliver the promised results. Today's social and environmental problems reflect the failure of our economic systems to account for many real impacts and costs, giving a false impression of economic success, often because they ignore the future. Our short-term materialistic perspective is accumulating not only financial debt, but resource debt, pollution debt, and human and social debts as well. As planetary limits increasingly constrain development possibilities, the moral requirement for responsible behaviour increases.

The concept of sustainability expresses an ethical position of justice and solidarity within and between generations. It condemns present actions that place a burden on or reduce the possibilities available to future generations. It thus requires a long-term view and an integrated perspective of the whole human and natural system. Sustainability also requires moderation. As Bahá'u'lláh warned over a hundred years ago, "if carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation." It is clear today that the natural systems of this planet have only a limited capacity to absorb the impacts of modern society, and many human development activities must be moderated to remain within those limits.

Therefore, for development to achieve sustainability, appropriate values must be incorporated at all levels of society. Each individual should, through education and individual investigation, adopt values to guide his or her life. These should include individual goals for the refinement of character, and belief in a social purpose contributing to the advancement of civilization. The recognition, implicit in the concept of sustainability, that individual good comes from the common good should inspire a spirit of service to others. The need today is for group salvation, rather than the invisible hand of self interest at the foundation of traditional economics. Achieving sustainable development will require that many in wealthier societies will have to sacrifice some of their immediate advantages for the larger good and for the benefit of future generations. The motivation for this can come from a sense of spiritual purpose, beliefs and values which can provide the real foundation for commitment to the changes needed in society. Today that commitment is best expressed as a sense of world citizenship based on a recognition of the oneness of humankind.

Families have a key role to play, because it is in the family that the education of each new generation begins, forming character and basic social and spiritual values. The transmission of culture, ethics and morality from generation to generation is an essential aspect of sustainability. A society that does not transmit its heritage will collapse.

A sustainable community must be characterized by its sense of solidarity, ensuring that everyone has a place with dignity and self-respect, just as it respects the needs of the unborn future generations. The present "Darwinian" values of market economics emphasize the economic efficiency of the survival of the fittest. This of course implies that the unfit should not survive, which in terms of individuals is morally unacceptable in any modern society. We have privatized employment, but left unemployment and

other social needs a public responsibility. It is no wonder that businesses are doing well and governments are deeply in debt, but this is not sustainable. We need to redefine the measure of successful development not as the most efficient use of money or capital, important as that is, but as the maximum use of the available human potential in the community. This is the real wealth-generating capacity of society, if we consider wealth to include not only the material, but the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of life. In this new framework, it becomes an essential role of social institutions to provide everyone with education and training, and then to ensure that each person has an opportunity to use their skills for the benefit of themselves and society. Work is not only an economic activity; it has social and spiritual value and should be seen in that larger context. It is also important for sustainability for local decisions to be taken in a global perspective, as a community expression of the concept of world citizenship.

There are also sustainability values needed for each cultural or ethnic group. Instead of being divided by fear and prejudice, each group must come to appreciate their own differences as part of that wonderful unity in diversity that is the human race. Each should maintain and develop their own cultural richness as a contribution to that larger whole that will be the future sustainable society.

Values need to be injected into the corporate dimension of society.

This is basically a structural problem. In the legal framework for businesses today, the only required measure of success for which managers are held responsible is the profit earned for their shareholders, and any corporate chief who neglects this is quickly replaced. Corporations have no positive obligation to be of service to society or to play any other social role. Many business people are highly ethical, but they are constrained by this structural problem. The business structure is basically amoral and materialistic.

The State or national dimension is also one where new values are needed.

We know much of what needs to be done to achieve sustainable development.

Agenda 21, the action plan adopted at the Rio Earth Summit, is a good example.

It is frequently said that what is lacking is the political will to implement these known requirements. Political will and the courage of leadership come from values. The extreme exercise of state sovereignty is the national equivalent of selfishness. What is needed today among States is a stronger sense of shared responsibility, working for the common good and not just national interest, recognizing that the real national interest in sustainability

can only be found in the common good of a harmonious world system. Nations must respect each other and consult together, and not just wield power.

International cooperation expressing these values is essential for sustainable development in an increasingly global society.

Spiritual values are thus not only relevant to the individual. These higher levels of human organization also need to function by, and respect, basic values. There is a collective spiritual dimension to a community

or society, like a soul in many bodies. In fact, this unity is a special distinguishing characteristic of humanity that will be increasingly apparent in its future evolution towards a sustainable world society.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Environment Programme.

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