

Biopolitics is the key to a better world, says Greek academic

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Arvanitis: There is an urgent need to incorporate the values of appreciation and a better understanding of life at all levels

Since 1985, the Biopolitics International Organization, or BIO, has developed rapidly while representatives from more than 40 countries are participating in efforts to implement the BIO goals. Individuals and educational institutions have already included BIO ideals and resolutions in their work and curricula.

One of the latest additions to the many courses available has been published this year, “Environmental Education for Sustainable Development in Turkey.” The course has been prepared in cooperation with the University of Ankara and the Municipality of Çankaya.

If one wanted to summarize what 10-time Nobel Peace Prize candidate Professor Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis is fighting for, it is included in the following statement. It is behind her founding the non-profit Biopolitics International Organization, or BIO, in 1985 in Athens.

“There is an urgent need to incorporate the values of appreciation and a better understanding of bios [life] at all levels of education and to incorporate the progress of the biological sciences in fields such as philosophy, diplomacy, economics, law, media, and others, since technology may be viewed as the pathway leading to a better future.”

She recently told the Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review that as a biologist, she wanted to share the beauty she saw in biology with the rest of the world. But mankind has engaged in the pursuit of wealth and wars and conflicts instead of an approach toward a comprehensive approach that respects human diversity and the wonder of life on earth

“This can’t be excused any more. We have to think about the cosmos, which is beautiful,” she said.

Since then, BIO has developed rapidly, and representatives from more than 40 countries are participating in efforts to implement BIO goals. Individuals and educational institutions have already included BIO ideals and resolutions in their work and curricula.

Looking back at 2009, Arvanitis said she saw an environmental and economic crisis that was closely linked and required an unprecedented level of international cooperation.

She said she blamed environmental degradation and global warming on a broad range of human activities. In her opinion, the most important of environmental concerns is climate change, followed by global warming.

Protecting the planet a fundamental responsibility

“Any serious global effort to combat climate change must begin with the energy sector and the development of alternative energy sources and fuels. Additionally, the security implications of climate change are attracting increased attention. The potential consequences of the environmental degradation associated with climate change are grave, and may, in turn, increase a range of risks to human security, including the risk of deadly conflict.”

Arvanitis said she sees protecting the planet’s health and security as a fundamental responsibility. She also suggests new structures, such as a society of hope with technology as the means of protecting life that needs to be built. Not only does this involve society but it extends into the area of governance.

She said she was working on promoting international legislation of what she calls “Bios Rights.” Since all forms of life are threatened and what boundaries that exist are man-made, new dimensions of understanding have to be taken into consideration and serve as the core of think and action.

Stressing that international cooperation is necessary for understanding life better, Arvanitis said nations have an international task that parallels their internal problems – advanced nations could use communication satellites to increase public awareness through a worldwide educational campaign.

The quality of life in all fields of human endeavor has to be improved and this can be done by assessing technology through the lens of life, she said. By emphasizing the positive aspects of technological contributions, life in this new millennium may benefit.

Arvanitis said Greece would be the ideal place for people to meet and assess progress and values and has even gone so far as to propose a “Bank of Ideas.”

Of course for Arvanitis the biological sciences form the center of her thinking. She said she would like to make public opinion more sensitive to the ramifications of these sciences and their impact on other fields of study.

Arvanitis was in Istanbul for the Marmara Foundation's Eurasian Economic Summit where she spoke. "The Marmara Foundation's meeting is a good place for an exchange of views since so many people are attending the meeting, even from Central Asia. Istanbul is in a significant position because of its geography. Greece can offer much too. Friendship between the two countries can cultivate joy for human beings and life."

Dr. Arvanitis' late husband was recently honored with a special ceremony for the work he has done in regard to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and his involvement in the repair of churches. Patriarch Bartholomew first had contact with BIO when he was still the metropolitan of Philadelphia in 1987 and later after he became patriarch he was invited to other meetings.

Arvanitis said she believes the patriarch has been strongly influenced by the work done by Biopolitics.

Focus on bio-education

BIO is deeply involved in the educational field, she said, especially in the "development of curriculum materials for pre-school, elementary, middle and higher levels of education. Universities and colleges are being encouraged to review their curricula and include Biopolitics in the study of theology, law, political science, the arts, business economics, since these fields are directly related to the biological sciences. Already, several universities have included Biopolitics as a course or major."

Over the past 25 years, BIO has hosted a variety of Greek-Turkish events with participants that formulate policy and make a difference, she said.

"This is important if we wish to assure the continuity of bios – life on our planet – and to place the environment at the heart of our thinking and action. New ethics, with the environment at the core of every endeavor, can help us to overcome negative stereotypes and build a truly civil society, where respect for all life will constitute the primary asset.

"In promoting governance with a vision of sustainability, BIO has emphasized that a global effort in defense of the environment can enhance international understanding and inspire common action for environmental protection and peace. Through the International University for the Bio-Environment, which we launched in 1990, we have used environmental education to vaccinate society with new thinking."

BIO has prepared a series of e-learning courses to place environmental education at the fingertips of every concerned citizen. These program places "educational material online with the aim of providing interdisciplinary models with environmental considerations and bioethics in every specialty. Since the inception of the BIO e-

learning program in 2003, students from 77 countries have enrolled in e-learning courses,” she said.

One of the latest additions to the many courses available has been published this year – “Environmental Education for Sustainable Development in Turkey.” The course has been prepared in cooperation with the University of Ankara and Municipality of Çankaya.

The book with a CD is a comprehensive view of Turkey with suggestions about what might be done in the future. Biopolitics is involved in 100 places or more throughout Turkey, not just in Ankara.

Arvanitis also praises Professor Ruşen Keleş highly for all the help he has given the organization in spreading its message around the country.

The project “developed educational material in print and as a series of e-learning courses to assist students, professionals, members of local authorities, women, and the unemployed, to become aware of the vast potential of sustainable development and of the new opportunities for economic growth offered by environmental protection.”

Five modules are featured in the publication: sustainable agricultural development; bio-economics, natural resources, including soil and water; environment and health; and clean and renewable energy.

Arvanitis concludes in the preface, “With climate change posing significant threats to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, it is hoped that the interchange of experiences, practices and ideas that has resulted from this project will create a better understanding of the urgency of sustainable development and lead to environmental appreciation in all sectors of society.”

Other priorities

Corporate environmental responsibility and a re-evaluation of the concept of profit have also been a priority for BIO since 1985. “We have held numerous conferences to sensitize business leaders to adopt environmentally and socially responsible strategies. We have also promoted the ‘bio-assessment of technology’ in an effort to place ethics for the protection of all forms of life at the core of technology and policy. This is essential if we wish to create a society of vision and hope,” she said.

One of the many proposals that have come out of these meetings is the suggestion that countries should start by reducing expenditures allocated to military purposes to fund programs in cultural development, health and education, eradication of poverty, and the protection of the environment.

Another proposal is for a World Environment Organization, one of several ideas produced at a meeting held by Biopolitics centennial of the birth of the second Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld.

The organization added to the worldwide observances an event commemorating the pioneering leadership of Hammarskjöld, whose contribution to the United Nations

largely shaped the organization, as we know it today. Other ideas included international courts but the most important purpose of the meeting was to discuss cooperation that would stimulate action and new thinking.

Not lacking in ambition for her project, Arvanitis concluded, saying, “I was born an optimist.”

Who is Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis?

Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis, who has a Ph.D. in Biology, founded the Biopolitics International Organization, or BIO, to promote international cooperation for the environment after dedicating over 20 years to teaching and research in biology.

She launched the International University for the Bio-Environment in 1990 and began a campaign for the award of Bios Prizes and a cease-fire during the Olympics in 1992.

Arvanitis is an Honorary President for Life of the Sri Lankan United Nations Association, along with Mikhail Gorbachev, Nelson Mandela and M. Strong, and Vice-President of the UNESCO Program of Man and the Biosphere’s Hellenic Committee.

She is also a member of the Global Commission to Fund the United Nations; the “Journal of Cleaner Production” Advisory Board; the New York Academy of Sciences; the American Institute of Biological Sciences; the Hellenic Philosophical Society; and the Society of Greek Writers and Honorary Professor of St. Petersburg State Technological University for Plant Polymers.

She holds an Honorary Doctorate from Mendeleyev University and is the recipient of the Abdi İpekçi Peace and Friendship Prize and the WATA Peace through Tourism Award. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. At the same time, she is also an author of books of poetry.