

## **ETHICS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN THE NEW EUROPE**

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### **Rise of the concept of sustainable development**

A new concern for the environmental issue started to arise in the international arena at the end of the 1960s. It was the time when, because of the many nuclear tests and the thoughtless use of pesticides such as DDT, it began to become perceptible that the introduction in the ecosystem of radioactive and chemical particles had a global effect on human beings and the environment, not restrainable to the affected area. All actions toward the natural environment provoke an answer that is neither linear nor local: it follows an unexpected and hardly foreseeable course. The concept of ecological interdependency tells us that the Earth is a "global unicum" built by the ongoing interactions between living beings and the physical environment.

This awareness was confirmed during the United Nations Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. The Conference was the starting point for the international community's policies on the environment and established the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). Moreover, the Conference was recognised as an answer to the increasing depletion of natural resources and its effects on human health and the human right to a clean environment. The first principle of the Stockholm Final Declaration points out that: "Human beings have a fundamental right to freedom, equality and basic living conditions in an environment where it is possible to live in dignity and well-being."

In 1975 in Nairobi, the Fifth Assembly of the Ecumenical Council of Churches discussed some documents about the future of humanity, technological development and non-violence. It was on that occasion that the expression "responsible society," cherished by the ecumenical movement, was changed to "sustainable society." Such a society should develop environmentally suitable technologies, and an economy that respects ecological principles and fundamental structures and fosters a style of living more in harmony with the environment.

Following these events, two additional important advancements in the reflection on the relationship between environment and development took place during the 1980s. The first came with the UN General Assembly approval of the International Declaration on the Right to Development, at its 1986 session. Article 1 of the Declaration states that "The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedom can be fully realised." Moreover, Article 2 recognises that "The person is the central subject of development and should be the active participant and beneficiary of the right to development." The Declaration stated that individual and collective participation in the development process is a guarantee for its concrete achievement. It also reaffirmed the principle of the interdependence and indivisibility of all human beings. The UN Programme for Development elaborated in the following years the content of the concept and introduced human development indicators, in order to assess the welfare of a society. These indicators do not only take economic growth - GNP into account, but also other factors such as political liberty, individual security, primacy of law, freedom of expression, political participation, equality, levels of literacy, and longevity.

The second advancement is represented by the conclusions of the 1987 Report of the World Commission for Environment and Development. The Commission conceptualised the notion of sustainable development, which means "a development that meets the needs of the present without endangering the capacities of the next generations to satisfy their own needs." It emphasised that development cannot be attained if the basis of natural resources deteriorates, and the environment cannot be protected if economic development implies environmental destruction. Endemic under-development of the third- and fourth- world countries constitutes the main cause of natural resources' degradation and excessive exploitation, thus having a negative impact on their development potential. At the same time, the main threat to the global ecosystem and, consequently, to the quality of life and to economic development itself, is also represented by the super-development of the wealthy societies.

The two turning points on the debate on the environmental issue were the overcoming of the traditional opposition between environment and development and the recognition, at a political level, of the right to development and the right to environment.

### **Principles of human and sustainable development**

There are two main characteristics of these rights, which are defined as third generation rights or solidarity rights: (a) They are both individual and collective rights, meaning that each individual has the right to live in a healthy environment and to benefit from natural resources, but they are required to manage the environment with balance and preserve natural goods, so that the other members of the community can also

enjoy them. (b) These rights are inter-generational; their goal is to assure future generations the ability to satisfy their vital needs.

The term "human sustainable development" illustrates in an effective way the interdependence existing between the right to the environment and to development. It finds a whole explanation in the updated reading of Article 28 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, adopted in 1948 by the UN General Assembly: "Everyone has the right to a social and international order in which all human rights - civil and political, economic, social and cultural, individual and collective, present and future generation rights - can be fully realised."

In this sense, we can still consider human and sustainable development as a fundamental human right, whose legal recognition is necessary in order to protect the new basic rights and needs of individuals and human communities, that emerged as a result of the economic, social and political advancements on the planet. In addition to the above mentioned principle of interdependence and indivisibility of all human rights, other principles and values are included in the right to human sustainable development:

- enjoyment of basic needs in the twofold temporal and spatial dimensions
- equity and social and economic justice, and equal access to natural resources
- solidarity, responsibility and co-operation
- political and economic democracy, nationally and internationally
- the primacy of human rights over state rights

Moreover, from an environmental viewpoint:

- ecological integrity - preserving the life-cycle of all non-human entities
- the notion of carrying capacity, according to which natural resources can not be exploited beyond their capability to regenerate
- the environment as our common heritage

To know the principles of human sustainable development is a first important step in order to successfully address the right direction of the process of transformation that characterises the new Europe.

### **The situation in the Western European countries**

The European Union is fostering policies for the implementation of sustainable development at the European level. Regarding the present situation in the European Union member states, the reform of the development model is "in the works." Within the European Union ample community legislation was approved and there is a growing commitment of national and sub-national bodies aiming to translate the principles of sustainability into concrete political action.

An important contribution was the approval, in February 1993, of the Fifth Programme for Action of the European Community for the environment and its sustainable development. The approach adopted by this new programme is different from the past. It is recognised that, to meet environmental goals and to achieve a sustainable development, it is no longer sufficient to wait, as in the past, until problems arise. On the contrary, it is urgent to address the activities which cause damage to the environment and exhaust natural resource reserves. This new attitude toward environmental problems entails a deep change of mentality of the model of consumption and of human behaviour. Moreover, in relation to goal implementation, the programme provides for a new perspective. According to this perspective, action should be taken not only at the European level, but at all levels of society, by national governments and regional and local administrations, by non-governmental organisations and financial institutions, and by producers and consumers.

The fundamental strategy which is proposed by the programme is to main-stream environmental policies into all other policies - industrial, agricultural, health, transportation - by the active participation of all actors in the society - administrators, firms, communities - and also through wider and deeper mechanisms of control and intervention particularly applied to the market influence.

In the Report for the Review of the Fifth Environmental Action Programme, published by the European Agency for the Environment, it is underlined that the EU is having positive results in the reduction of some indicators of environmental pollution. But this action is not yet sufficient to attain concrete and sustainable change. Per capita consumption of environmental resources - energy, water, land - is still too high; the production of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases is too high, and the policies for waste management, protection of biodiversity, and quality of the urban environment are insufficient.

Despite the many difficulties and obstacles, it is nevertheless important to notice that a process of assimilation of the new concept of human sustainable development is growing both at the institutional and the civil society level. It is however clear that this challenge cannot be achieved individually by Western European countries, but it involves the entire European continent. The interdependency process characterising present times does not leave us any alternative except the following: the solution for economic, social, environmental, political and security problems in the new Europe requires a common action, an agreed political strategy between East and West, North and South, that would pay the maximum attention to the enjoyment of fundamental human rights of present and also future generations. However, much is still

to be done in order to put into practice a human and sustainable development.

The challenge of sustainability is to build a new international democratic order which, at the European level, constitutes a commitment for the establishment of the Common House. It means to choose the ethics of co-operation and mutual aid, share knowledge and resources, and to focus on the politics and economy of human rights of present and future generations.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly mention some suggestions in order to underline the role played by different subjects which are on the front line in the common effort toward the achievement of a human sustainable development.

The events of the recent years show a rise of a new alliance between non-governmental organisations, inter-governmental organisations and local authorities. We observe, actually, more and more initiatives that are promoted together by these new actors of international politics. These subjects are increasingly aggregating the political request for change and are committed in different ways in the effort aimed to solve problems and satisfy basic needs of individuals and their communities, both at the local and international level. It seems that they are more likely to be receptive than other organisations, i.e. the National State, of the need, that cannot be delayed, to act along a continuum of roles from the micro, local level - district, town, village - to the macro, global level.

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