

SUSTAINABILITY: AN ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL NECESSITY

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Summary

Sustainability is dependent on the relationships of human beings with their natural and social environment. Without viable and stable relations within and between both orders there will be no sustainability. In this context we point to a cluster of issues. Firstly, it is very hard to define sustainability satisfactorily, not least because decisions at the micro-level may seem rational, while at a macro-level these decisions appear to be irrational. Secondly, our perception and use of the natural and social environment is culturally mediated. Our model of and for the environment varies from one historical period to another and between regions.

With respect to the natural environment the differences in conceptualizing the relationship between nature and culture are important. We emphasize three views: orientalism, paternalism, and communalism. Generally speaking, Western society is disconnected from nature in contrast with many so-called primitive cultures. We argue that primitive cultures can teach the industrialized world interesting lessons in sustainability.

As far as relationships between human beings are concerned, two conditions are important: institutional coordination and trust. The complexity of the issue of “social cohesion” is intensified by the tandem process of globalization and localization. At the same time we see homogenizing tendencies resulting from growth of mutual dependencies and interactions as well as continued or even reinforced heterogenization and fragmentation. This glocalization promotes multiculturalism, all kinds of social exclusion and multiple identities. The shifting pattern of glocalization necessitates a

rethinking of “good governance.” In this context we make a plea for the management of cultural diversity. After all, cultural diversity is as creative and necessary as biodiversity.

1. Introduction

In this contribution we discuss two types of core relationships confronting humankind. Both have to be sustainable. However, sustainability is hard to accomplish nowadays because of the interplay between globalization and localization. This interplay results in complex mixtures, new social hierarchies, changing cultural boundaries and multiple identities. We have to acknowledge we live in a world characterized by multiplicity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence. Therefore, we make a plea for a specific view on the dialectics between culture and nation-state. Accordingly, we have to learn to manage diversity.

2. Uncertainties and Risks

Humans are involved with other humans. This creates a paradox. After all, self-involvement implies dependence on others. These others are both a means and an impediment to self-realization. This dependence is, incidentally, not limited to fellow humans. In addition to the interrelationship between humans and the sociocultural environment, we see an interdependence between humans and the “natural environment.” So, we cannot limit ourselves to the biotope or to the technotope. We have to deal with the sociotope.

The way in which these two core relationships are shaped and interpreted will determine, to a large extent, the general quality, and the livability of the “world order.” Without maintaining the natural environment and without the realization of stable and acceptable relationships between (groups of) people, no sustainable developments are possible. With this view we link up with that of the Brundtland Committee and the description given with regard to sustainable development, something the committee sees as a process of change in which the exploitation of useful sources, the directing of investments, the orientation of technological developments and institutional social organization must be in mutual harmony and able to extend both existing and future potential while satisfying human needs and aspirations. On the basis of this definition we can only conclude that much needs to be improved. The existing world order is, after all, characterized by enormous uncertainties about the preconditions for humankind’s own existence and the possibilities for its development. We may conclude that the “risk society” has emerged (Beck, 1992). In this context it is not so much the production of risks as such but the risk profile that is important. Within a growing and differentiated world system, every region and state has developed its own specific profile, a profile built up of three types of risk. The first type of risk is of an ecological nature. Ecological risks have no limits, in terms of space, time, or society. Traditional dividing lines along which the division of risks has always taken place such as those between social classes or nations are becoming fainter; a globalization of risks is taking place. It would seem that here there is evidence of organized irresponsibility. The second type of risk is the so-called individualization danger. This emerges out of the tensions between the erosion of old sociocultural traditions and the growth of the flexible society in which

differentiation and heterogeneity are coming to the fore. This tension is partly the cause of the very diverse degrees of esteem in which individualization is held. Individualization is on the one hand linked to anomie, growing (group) egoism, the disappearance of solidarity, and playing into the hands of those who already have a strong social position. On the other hand, the emancipatory possibilities of individualization are pointed out. Seen from this perspective, individualization is not detrimental to solidarity; it is a decollectivization of organized solidarity, which has become anonymous through bureaucratization and uniformization. The third type of risk is that of control, which relates to the far-reaching developments in science and politics. It is notably the role of science and technology that is crucial here. Science and technology do, in fact, provide solutions and, at the same time, contribute to the creation of new risks.

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Biographical Sketches

Selma van Londen studied cultural anthropology at Utrecht University (the Netherlands). She defended her Ph.D. thesis on mythology and ecology of the Inuit in 1994. Since its foundation (1994) she has been a member of the Research Group Circumpolar Cultures. She has published several articles, among others: “Mythology and ecology: A problematic ‘pas de deux’” (*Cultural Dynamics* **8** (1996): pp. 25–50), “Identity and myth: The case of the orphan boy” (*Etudes/Inuit/Studies* **20** (1996): pp. 55–77), and “Mythology and identity construction among the Inuit” in J. Oosten and C. Remie (eds.), *Arctic Identities*, Leiden: CNWS, 1998: pp. 109–135. At present she is associate professor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology (Utrecht University).

Arie de Ruijter studied cultural anthropology. He has been professor in cultural and social anthropology at Utrecht University (the Netherlands) since 1983; professor in the social sciences and dean of the faculty of social sciences at Tilburg University (the Netherlands) since 2000 as well as scientific director of the national research school CERES since 1994. He has published extensively on theory and methodology of anthropology. Recently his research activities have focused on social cohesion, identity formation, citizenship, and ethnicity. His publications include “Cultural pluralism and citizenship” (*Cultural Dynamics* **7** (1995), pp. 215–232), “The era of glocalisation” in T. van Naerssen, M. Rutten, and A. Zoomers (eds.), *The Diversity of Development*, Assen: van Gorcum, 1997, pp. 381–389, and “Ethnicity and Identity”, in M. Cl. Foblets and P. Ching Lin (eds.), *Culture, Ethnicity and Migration*, Leuven: Acco, 1999, pp. 69–80 (with S. M. van Londen).