THE ETHICS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Dr. John Barkdull Director of Global Studies

Sustainable development has become a central value of the United Nations and a broadly accepted goal for policy makers around the world. In part, the case for sustainable development asserts ethical obligations to the poor, historically disadvantaged countries, and future generations. Such ethical obligations have become embodied in international law and practice. The most widely recognized definition states: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[1] This is elaborated to emphasize the essential needs of the poor and that achieving sustainable development requires bringing human society into a right relationship with the natural environment.

The question arises as to what we aim to sustain and what threatens sustainability. To raise the problem of sustainability implies that something we value and want to persist is subject to deterioration, decay or disruption of some kind. An ethic of sustainability would suggest a set of norms, values, and social practices that maintain — and develop in a positive direction — what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has termed a "system of interest." Unless the system of interest is specified, we cannot know whether our policies and actions enhance or undermine its sustainability. Even less can we know whether we are meeting ethical standards pertaining to sustainable development.

What, then, do we want sustained? Perhaps the most salient answer is that we want our ways of life, more or less in the same or better condition as we now experience, to be sustained during our own lifetimes and to persist for future generations. The system of interest, in broad strokes, is the modern society built up over the last several centuries. That would include the major elements of contemporary civilization, including reliance on advanced technology, an extensive infrastructure to support industrial, commercial and urban life, historically high standards of living available to all, or nearly all, people, and a degree of civil liberties and freedoms. Thus, sustainability means far more than simply ensuring that the human species does not go extinct.

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[1] World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

This is not to say that every part of the world should remain as it is today. To the contrary, the term 'development 'implies change toward an improved state of affairs. In international contexts, we think of development as movement toward a more prosperous, more free, and perhaps more democratic society. In particular, we want the poor, developing countries of the world to rise to higher living standards, longer life spans, lower infant mortality and other signs of economic and social progress. Presumably, when and if the world ever achieves its development goals, further development would not be necessary and the emphasis can fall on sustainability.

The problem for this formulation arises in recognition that a "high mass consumption society" worldwide, one in which all humans are lifted out of poverty and can enjoy lives more or less in line with western standards, could render sustainability impossible. The old development goals of rising wealth and income for all require industrialization and extensive infrastructure. This means, in turn, increasing production of the energy needed to drive a global industrial economy and extraction of large amounts of natural resources. Consequently, pollution, depletion of natural resources, and global warming remain challenges even in a world that has adopted the commitment to sustainable development.

Squaring the circle has not proven easy. Since the 1970s, scientists and scholars have warned us that industrial society would one day reach the limits to growth. More recently, scientists have identified nine planetary boundaries that define the environmental context for civilization as we know it,[2] which has emerged and grown during the benign "Holocene." Human activities have become so profound that we may now be in the "Anthropocene," a period during which human endeavors undermine the conditions for civilization.[3]

As things stand, the most likely future is that the Holocene conditions for civilization will continue to degrade and maintaining life as we know it will become increasingly untenable. To take the most prominent and pressing case, global warming is likely to worsen, with global average temperature rising about 4°C by 2100. According to Kevin Anderson of the Tyndall Centre, 4°C "is incompatible with any reasonable characterization of an organized, equitable and civilized

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[2] Johan Rockstrom et al. "Planetary boundaries: exploring the safe operating space for humanity." Ecology and Society. 14 (2): 32.

[3] Ian Angus, Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).

global community."[4] Global warming is only one of many challenges. Among others, it is difficult to see how a global society in which enough nuclear weapons exist to destroy civilization can be called sustainable. Moreover, economic growth, rather than broadly benefiting the great majority of society has instead resulted in a historically high concentration of wealth at the top. A handful of the ultra-rich own as much as half the world's population. Again, how this can be compatible with sustainable development is difficult to see.

The current situation thus calls for demanding ethical standards. Has the international community promulgated and adopted such challenging standards? Yes, it has, but the degree of implementation is in doubt. Human rights provide the foundation for the ethics of sustainable development. Examining international law, as expressed in treaties and other documents, we find these ethical principles:

- Intergenerational equity
- Common but differentiated responsibilities
- Polluter pays
- The Precautionary Principle
- Human security

Taken together, implementing and abiding by these principles would hold considerable promise for furthering sustainable development.

Intergenerational equity requires that development take account of the long-term impacts of what we do today. Common but differentiated responsibilities means that everyone must play a part in achieving sustainable development, although wealthy industrialized countries have duties towards the less advantaged that reflect different capacities and accountability for past practices. The polluter pays principle asserts that no enterprise or country should expect a free ride; it is not acceptable to push costs onto third parties to gain an advantage today. The precautionary principle argues that we should demand that those who introduce new chemicals, technologies and processes should show that they do not harm others either directly or indirectly. Potentially dangerous new methods or products are guilty until proven innocent.

Human security challenges the traditional state system's emphasis on national security.[5] Although not as well reflected in international law

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[4] Kevin Anderson, "The hidden agenda: how veiled techno-utopias shore up the Paris Agreement," Comment on Climate, kevinanderson.info/blog/the-hidden-agenda-how-veiled- techno-utopias-shore-up-the-paris-agreement/, 2016.

[5] United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, "What Is Human Security?" United Nations, https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/, n.d.

as the previously noted principles, human security reflects growing recognition that, from an individual perspective, securing state interests can itself be harmful to human rights and well-being. The state justifies itself as the protector of its people. Thus, military expenditures are ethically valid because they are required to prevent foreign attacks on the people and their interests. But states sometimes adopt military capabilities, such as nuclear deterrence, that could do far more harm to the people than can be justified. Thus, one element of sustainable development has to be to secure the conditions that ensure human security. In combination, all these ethical principles could point the way toward a more just, free, and peaceful global society, one that can be sustained for generations to come.