

## HOW CAN CULTURE LEAD TO SUSTAINABILITY

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***Summary:** It is no doubt that our society is a consumerist society. Perpetuating this situation will lead to conflicts (wars) and will end in ecological disaster. This paper intends to underline the importance of culture in molding ideas and actions so that we could move from consumerism to sustainability. Two of the cultural aspects that can have a direct impact on people in helping developing sustainability are education and religion. Education from an early age towards sustainability, reorienting the curricula and implementing a new lifestyle that is close to nature can have benefits for the coming generations. Meantime, religion should play a more important role in relating its values to nowadays problems. From liturgy to social service, religions can promote values that lead to sustainability.*

***Keywords:** sustainability, culture, education, religion*

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### OVERVIEW

**I**t is a fact that in order to have sustainability one must find practical ways to obtain it. Man lives in the realm of culture and is, in a certain manner, a product of culture. Culture can shape decisions and create behavior patterns that lead to sustainability.

Culture can be defined as a way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time. Culture is understood as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning.

Culture contributes to the development of mankind. It is obvious that not any kind of development is good in long-term. Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs [1]. Countless choices in human lives are reinforced, driven by, or stem from traditions, whether religious traditions, rituals, cultural taboos, or what people learn from elders and their families [2].

United Nations define sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet [3].

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Sustainability takes into account how natural system functions. It acknowledges that human civilization takes resources to sustain our modern way of life. Sustainability takes into account how we might live in harmony with the natural world around us, protecting it from damage and destruction. There are three pillars of sustainability: economic development, social development and environmental protection [4].

In 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development met to discuss and develop a set of goals to work towards; they grew out of the Millennium Development Goals that claimed success in reducing global poverty while acknowledging there was still much more to do. It eventually came up with a list of 17 items which included amongst other things:

- The end of poverty and hunger;
- Better standards of education and healthcare - particularly as it pertains to water quality and better sanitation;
- Sustainable economic growth while promoting jobs and stronger economies
- Sustainability to include health of the land, air and sea [5].

We will tackle two areas that belong to the cultural realm and see how these can shape attitudes toward sustainability: education and religion.

## **EDUCATION**

Habits, values, preferences are shaped to a large degree in childhood. Education can have a transformative effect on learners. Incorporating sustainability education into teaching, training and school curricula and providing lifelong opportunities to learn about sustainability will be essential in cultivating societies that will thrive long into the future. The key will be to expand programs and embed them deeply into leading educational institutions.

Early childhood education can help build a culture of sustainability if it is framed in terms of sustainable development, if curriculum and pedagogical guidelines are oriented toward education for sustainability, if staff training in this field is reinforced, and if patterns and communities are involved in the process [6].

The project approach is a teaching strategy that addresses children's intellectual dispositions, allowing children to examine the basis of their own opinions, ideas and assumptions. This strategy will help them examine the behaviors of their own cultures and others in terms of implications for sustainable development [7].

Marketing is linked to a host of public health and social problems facing children today. The World Health Organization and other public health institutions identify marketing to children as a significant factor in the worldwide epidemic of children obesity. In addition, advertising and marketing have been associated with eating disorders, sexualization, youth violence, family stress and underage alcohol and tobacco use [8].

Thus, the ability to play creatively is central to the human capacity to experiment, to act rather than react and to differentiate oneself from the environment. Play promotes attributes essential to a democratic populace, such as curiosity, empathy, cooperation and a sense of competence, a belief that the individual can make a difference in the world. Constructive problem-solving, divergent thinking and the capacity for self-regulation are all developed through creative play [9].

The fervor of government deregulation that began in the United States in the 1980s, in combination with digital revolution, has resulted in an unprecedented escalation of commercialism in the lives of children. In 1983 U.S. markets spent \$100 million targeting children. Today we speak of \$17 billion. While much of the impetus from marketing to children originates in the United States, the trend is promulgated worldwide by multinational corporations. Food companies alone spend about \$1,9 billion annually for marketing directly to children around the world [10].

The underlying message of nearly all marketing is that things people buy will make them happy. Aside from the fact that research on happiness shows this to be false, immersing children in the message that material goods are essential to self-fulfillment promotes the acquisition of materialistic values, which have been linked to depression and low self-esteem. Research shows that children with more materialistic values are also less likely to engage in environmentally sustainable behaviors such as recycling or conserving water [11].

Previous generations took it for granted that children used their leisure time to play. But that is no longer true. Play is an endangered species, and there needs to be conscious, concerted effort to save make-believe for future generations. The consequence of millions of children growing up deprived of play is a world bereft of joy, creativity, critical thinking, individuality and meaning. Children should spend time in nature and play. Meanwhile they should spend less time watching TV, and interacting on internet. Schools should refocus their final goals. Also, institutions of higher education – like all schools – must aim to create an ecologically literate and ecologically competent citizenry, one that knows how earth works as a physical system and why that knowledge is vitally important to them personally and to the larger human prospect.

Educators are obliged to tell the truth about such things but then to convert the anxiety that often accompanies increased awareness of danger to positive energy that can generate constructive changes. To be effective on a significant scale the creative energies of the rising generations must be joined with strong and bold institutional leadership to catalyze a future better than the one in prospect.

## **RELIGION**

Over the past two decades, the indicators of engagement on environmental issues by religions and spiritual traditions have grown. Opinion polls reveal increased interest in such developments. Faith communities are potentially an influential gateway to discussions about environmental protection. A 2009 poll found that 72% of Americans say that religion beliefs play at least a somewhat important role in their thinking about the stewardship of the environment and climate change [12].

Personal consumption continues upward even in wealthy countries and consumer lifestyles are spreading rapidly to newly prospering nations. Few institutions exist in most societies to promote simpler living and those that do have little influence. So, sustainability advocates have looked to religions for help, such as in the landmark 1990 statement “Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion” led by Carl Sagan and signed by 32 Nobel Laureates [13].

Simplicity and anti-consumerism are promoted by the teachings of the church, for example Pope Benedict’s July 2009 encyclical *Charity in Truth* [14], a strong statement on inequities engendered by capitalism and the harm inflicted on both people and the planet.

Religion can practically contribute to a culture of sustainability.

Religion can educate about the environment. As religious traditions embrace the importance of the natural environment, it makes sense to include ecological instruction in religious education, as many church teachings include social justice dimension. Teaching nature as “the Book of Creation” and environmental degradation a sin of which man is responsible, is key to moving people beyond an instrumentalist understanding of the natural world.

Religion can educate about the consumption. In an increasingly “full world” in which human numbers and appetites press against a natural limit, introducing an ethic of limited consumption is an urgent task [15].

Religion can educate about investments. Many religious institutions avoid investments in weapons, cigarettes or alcohol. Why not also steer funds toward sustainability initiatives such as solar power?

Religion can express the sacredness of the natural world in liturgies and rituals. The most important assets of a faith tradition are arguably the intangible ones. Rituals, customs, and liturgical expressions speak to the heart in a profound way that cognitive knowledge cannot.

Also, religion can reclaim forgotten assets. Religious traditions have a long list of little-emphasized economic teachings that could be helpful for building sustainable economies. These include prohibitions against the overuse of farmland and pursuit of wealth as an end in itself, advocacy of broad risk-sharing, critiques of consumption, and economies designed to serve the common good. Much of this wisdom would be especially helpful now, as economies are being restructured and as people seem open to new rules of economic action and a new understanding of ecological economics.

Often painted as conservative and unchanging institutions many religions are in fact rapidly embracing the modern cause of environmental protection. The greatest contribution the world’s religions could make to the sustainability challenge may be to take seriously their own ancient wisdom on materialism. Combined with the newfound passion of many religious for healing the environment, this ancient wisdom could help create new and sustainable civilization.

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