

Introduction

Ethics of sustainable development: the moral imperative for the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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“The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life”.

(Albert Einstein)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, anchored on its ambitious 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their corresponding 169 targets, was adopted unanimously by the 193 Member States at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015. The Agenda heralds a historic milestone in United Nations-led global efforts to achieve sustainable development through cooperative multilateralism. The commencement of the implementation of this transformative Agenda in January 2016, which will continue through 2030, has already generated immense interest and enthusiasm throughout the world from various stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and United Nations agencies, as well as the regional and international organizations. They seek to substantively contribute to fulfilling the SDGs. Notwithstanding this unprecedentedly remarkable blueprint accord, a degree of trepidation persists regarding possible obstacles, barriers and challenges to its implementation. A well-coordinated and integrated approach to governance for enforcement, monitoring, assessing the effectiveness and reporting at all levels, genuine political will, resource mobilization, and incentives for the private sector are among such perceived barriers and challenges.

World leaders have rightly asserted in the 2030 Agenda that the 17 SDGs and their corresponding 169 targets are “integrated” and “indivisible”. The 2030 Agenda stipulates transcendentally: “The interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized. If we realize our ambitions across the full extent of the Agenda, the lives of all will be profoundly improved

and our world will be transformed for the better”.¹ Any effective implementation plan, hence, must avoid a silo approach, and instead should consider all SDGs to be equally important. For instance, SDG# 11 on sustainable cities can only be achieved if SDG# 6 on water and sanitation, SDG# 7 on energy, SDG# 9 on resilient infrastructure and SDG# 3 on health are harmoniously implemented. Furthermore, none of the 17 SDGs could be achieved unless SDG# 8 on sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all, and SDG# 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, are implemented in tandem.

Out of the three dimensions of sustainable development — economic growth, social development and environmental protection — the main challenge, in my view, originates from adequately and effectively attempting to secure the *environmental* and *social* dimensions, so as to ensure the “integration” of the latter with economic growth. This is because *economic growth* remains the primary objective of all governments and policy-makers, by virtue of their mandated responsibilities. The challenging question, therefore, is “how can we better motivate policy-makers, and society as a whole, to take action toward achieving those two relatively neglected dimensions, in order to implement the SDGs in their entirety and in an integrated manner?”

The “economic case”, based on *self-interest* discourse, seems to be the prevalent argument for rationalizing the importance and benefits of implementing the SDGs for all. The argument is premised on the assumption that each stakeholder — such as governments and the private sector — could benefit economically from implementing the SDGs through, for instance, the generation of new, albeit environmentally benign-by-design and *green* employment

¹ Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015, A/RES/70/1, 21 October 2015.

opportunities, thereby reducing risks to investments while increasing gross domestic product (GDP). However, our collective experience since the first Rio conference (Earth Summit, June 1992), as well as that demonstrated in scientific scholarship since then, shows that an “economic-based self-interest” approach seems to fail to motivate stakeholders to incorporate the other two dimensions in their national and organizational development planning in an efficient and timely manner. Hence, a gap persists between each of the three pillars of sustainable development, which is likely to result in unbalanced and unintegrated treatment of the SDGs. Therefore, we need an alternative, more appealing discourse that can bridge the gaps and mobilize all stakeholders around a “universally shared and valued responsibility” for acting toward common goals, or the effective integration and implementation of the SDGs. I would call such alternative discourse inspired by that universally shared responsibility “the moral (or ‘ethical’)² imperative” by all for the advocates of the sustainable development paradigm, and more specifically for contributing to fulfilling the SDGs.

The predominant reliance on the economic appeals matches the widespread misconception that people are primarily motivated by (economic) *self-interest*, and are not motivated to change unless some *personal benefit* is implicated. As Bolderdijk *et al.* (2013) points out, this overlooks an important source of human motivation, which is that people are motivated to maintain a “positive self-concept”. This can be achieved by acting in line with one’s internal moral standards. Owing to the motivation to maintain a *moral self-image*, people may prefer *biospheric* to *economic* appeals, rendering the latter less effective than commonly assumed. Although often not an explicit motive, most people desire a stable, competent and *morally good self-concept*, and strive for consistency between their behaviour and their self-concept. Engaging in morally good behaviour (for example, volunteering) can foster the positive *self-concept*, thereby eliciting positive affect. Immoral conduct (for example, lying) may, however, threaten the positive self-concept, thereby eliciting negative affect. Thus, the desire to maintain a positive self-concept can motivate people to act in a morally sound fashion. Most cultures share the belief that nature is “sacred”; hence, they consider it part of their moral responsibility to take care of the environment. As a result, acting “green” may exert a positive influence on the self-concept, allowing people to “feel good”, whereas the pursuit of monetary gains can be considered morally questionable and unjustified (Bolderdijk *et al.*, 2013).

To promote an “ethically-based” discourse, we should ask questions such as: “Is it morally important to achieve the

SDGs?” “Is it ethically wrong to strive for prosperity while damaging the planet or inflicting loss to people’s welfare or life?” “Is it morally justified if we contribute to dramatically shifting the climate, which could result in devastating consequences for both ourselves and the world around us?”

The moral-ethical discourse can be influential in motivating or urging individuals, as well as groups and organizations such as governments and the private sector, if a *utilitarian ethics* approach to sustainable development is pursued. The “greatest good or least harm for the greatest number” principle can easily be envisioned. The stakeholders involved are all the Earth’s inhabitants, both human and non-human. Sustainable development would create the greatest good or least harm by allowing those inhabitants (and potential offspring) to exist in a world where the air is breathable, the water is drinkable, the soil is fertile, and renewable resources thrive. It is difficult to use the traditional *monetary cost-benefit analysis* to determine whether sustainable development is worthwhile. First, although many current and future costs could be estimated and discounted back to present values, it is probably impossible to comprehend what types and amounts of costs might be necessary in the future. Second, the benefits of sustainable development are significantly more *qualitative* than *monetarily quantitative*. For example, how can the value of a living species be estimated? But, even without finances attached, the result would be undeniably conclusive: no matter how high the costs of sustainable development, the benefits of current and continued existence by the earth’s species must exceed that cost. Ethically, the benefits of life outweigh the costs (Payne and Raiborn, 2001).

If we use the moral theory of “rights/duty”, we can ask: “Is an inhabitable environment a ‘moral right’?” Blackstone believes that access to a livable environment is a human right, because such an environment is essential for humans to fulfil their capacities. Thus, everyone has the correlative *moral obligation* to respect that right. John Rawls, the renowned twentieth century American philosopher, and Immanuel Kant, the renowned nineteenth Century Austrian philosopher, would support this concept because of the rationality of people being entitled to rights that do not infringe upon others’ rights. A human’s inhabitable environment includes flora, fauna, and resources (e.g., air, water, and minerals). These non-human elements of the planet are not responsible for, nor can they correct, the ecologically damaging discharges of pollutions or disproportionate use of resources created by humans (Payne and Raiborn, 2001).

The good news is that there is a growing and shared understanding that environmental degradation violates fundamental human rights, which is based on *moral reasoning*. If, for instance, climate change causes death or harms socio-economic and environmental ecosystems and negatively affects those with low carbon footprints, it would violate their basic rights to a healthy environment and a stable climate and safe ecosystem, which are ethically indefensible. The “human rights-environment” nexus has been on the

² It’s worth noting early on that I use both “morality” and “ethics” interchangeably in this preamble, without assuming any particular difference between the two terms. By these two terms, I am referring to a set of “universally recognized values” that all human beings, regardless of their background, can relate to and conscientiously accept. This is despite the fact that some scholars have made a distinction between the two terms.

agenda of the United Nations Human Rights Council for the past few years. Nevertheless, in-depth studies and research on the various violations of fundamental human rights due to environmental degradation — ranging from climate change to biodiversity loss to forest degradation to land use change — are yet to be probed. The bottom-line is that the human rights approach to environmental issues should be envisaged from a *moral* perspective.

In a final analysis, sustainable development actions by governments or the private sector should be undertaken as a result of an innate *duty*, and not simply out of *self-interest*. In other words, such actions should not be taken only because they will reduce costs, increase revenues, create jobs or

increase GDPs. Rather, they should also be taken to achieve the SDGs because, as rational human beings, preserving Earth's environment and protecting the welfare of society as a whole are morally the *right* and the *good* things to do.

References

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