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Environmental Ethics and Sustainability

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Synonyms

Ecology; Social justice; Sustainability; Sustainable development

Definition

Since the World Commission on Environment and Development – also known as the Brundtland Report – first coined the concept of sustainable development in 1987, the meaning of the term has evolved considerably. However, there is general consensus that sustainability involves the reconciliation of ecological, social, and economic imperatives (Dale 2001; Robinson and Tinker 1997). Without equal access to these three imperatives, sustainability will not be realized (Dale 2001). From the beginning, the social imperative has been the least understood and routinely drops out when economic imperatives dominate (Dale and Newman 2008; Mayo and Ellis 2009; Moore 2007; Mueller and Dooling 2011; Saha and Paterson 2008; Sarmiento and Sims 2015; Szibbo 2016).

The Social Imperative and Equity Issues

With respect to sustainability writ large, the social imperative implicates considerable equity issues, including a time dimension, that is, decisions taken now that are unsustainable "lock-in" development paths for future generations and foreclose the options of future generations. Although the Brundtland Report identified extreme inequality in resource distribution as the "main environmental problem" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, p. 6), claiming that "a world in which poverty and inequality are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises" (1987, p. 43), maldistribution of resources has continued to rise. Further, Piketty (2017) explains in depth that inequity is far worse now than 30 years ago when the Brundtland Report was published.

Equity issues have been variously referred to as environmental ethics, social justice, and, more recently, spatial justice, which introduces place into the "social" (Soja 2008). People and human communities have differential access to resources simply by virtue of the place they were born and either an abundance or paucity of natural resources. Spatial justice, therefore, brings new

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meaning to the privileges and advantages of class, race, and gender and how these modifiers have been dispersed according to geographic locations (Soja 2008). A further rationale for the existence of spatial justice is because "seeking to increase justice or to decrease justice is a fundamental objective in all societies, a foundational principle for sustaining human dignity and fairness" (Soja 2008).

A further argument for the integration of place into social justice is the reality that modern-day issues, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, are interconnected and dependent upon global-scale solutions. Climate change impacts are simultaneously local, regional, national, and international, with differential impacts on communities. For example, small island states are more vulnerable to sea level rise than inland communities, due to their small geographical area, isolation, and exposure. The failure to address these differential impacts and inequities results in even greater global turbulence. Further, 60% of humanity live in coastal areas, and therefore, both developing and developed communities share vulnerability to climate change and sea level rise. Low-lying coastal areas in all countries are threatened, including agriculturally productive river deltas worldwide (Slade, COP 1, 1995).

Sustainability and Generational Equity

In addition to inequities in access to natural resources as a function of place, there are now gross inequities that are generational. According to the Credit Suisse Research Institute's global wealth report, global wealth rose by 6.4% in the 12 months to June 2017, and the ranks of the rich expanded again, with 2.3 million new millionaires added to the total, and the top 1% own more than half of all global wealth. With respect to millennials, Americans currently aged between 30 and 39 years are calculated to have amassed 46% less wealth on average in 2017 than the equivalent cohort had gathered in 2007 (The Economist 2017).

And there are global impacts that do not take into account health effects in addition to spatial justice. In 1994, Mexico signed a free trade agreement with the United States and Canada, which triggered an insidious rise of obesity and malnutrition. Mexico became a tariff-free dumping ground for soft drinks and junk food imported from the United States. Almost a quarter of a century later, Mexico has the world's second highest obesity rate and growing child malnutrition crisis (Whitlow Delano and Summers 2018). This is but one example of the inequitable distributable effects of ignoring the critical intersection of social and spatial justice and its impacts on health outcomes. Both are essential to the realization of sustainable community development worldwide.

Conclusion

Sustainability for some and not all clearly is not working with the rising threats from terrorism, the increase in the number of environmental refugees (Dale and Newman 2008). In addition, increasing places of "haves" and "have nots," social exclusivity (Haase et al. 2017), homogenizing concentration of social problems in one place, and augmenting income disparities create a perfect storm for feeding the rising populism of the last decade. Only when social and spatial justice are integrated, recognizing that basic human needs must be met at the same time as the inequitable distribution and accessibility to ecological, social, and economic resources have to be addressed, will a lasting world peace be achieved and the full potential of human civilization reached.

Cross-References

- ▶ Distributive Justice
- ▶ Economics, Ethics and the Environment
- ▶ Environmental Justice

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