
Sustainability and Culture

a call for discussion

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1 Introduction: background and objectives

The Executive Board of UNESCO has set aside an important role for the organization in activities concerning sustainable development. Among other things, this reflects a resolution adopted earlier by the United Nations General Assembly (57/254) in which a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) was established (2005-14). UNESCO's contribution to sustainable development was made visible in the 2006-7 Draft Programme and Budget (UNESCO 33C/5), in both the education programme and the sciences and culture programmes³. For the National UNESCO Commission too, sustainable development was the common theme running through its 2004-5 and 2006-7 work plans.

In 2005, the theme of sustainable development was discussed within UNESCO Netherlands, whereby the role of culture in particular was revealed as an element lacking in clarity; the relationship between the two terms was, however, more clear in earlier UNESCO documents⁴. The National Commission believed that a discussion of this was desirable against the background of what was already being done in the UNESCO Netherlands context within the framework of sustainable development⁵. The National Commission regards the term 'culture' as encompassing the institutional aspects of development as well as the use of natural resources, rights and responsibilities, and the educational dimension. The latter dimension is not dealt with below (as it has in principle already been covered in connection with the DESD, also at the national level) and the focus is therefore rather on the more conceptual aspects of the relationship(s) between sustainable development and culture.

This memorandum is aimed at developing a framework within which the activities of the National Commission and its working groups in the area of sustainable development and culture can be developed, and with the help of which contributions can be made to other sustainable development activities, both nationally and internationally (UNESCO).

2 Sustainable development

2.1 Definitions

Within UNESCO⁶, sustainable development is defined in accordance with the so-called Brundtland report to the United Nations General Assembly (World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987), the outcomes of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, 2002). Sustainable development is therefore: 'development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The needs and aspirations of current and future generations are thus centrally positioned and satisfying the needs of the current generation is subject to the condition that this does not adversely affect the possibilities open to future generations. This is an anthropocentric definition that emphasises temporal aspects.

In the same UNESCO document, the definition (that was not internationally agreed upon) from the World Conservation Strategy (WCS, 1980) is cited, according to which sustainable development is development within the boundaries that are set by ecosystems: 'improving the quality of human life *while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems*'. This definition goes further than the 'Brundtland' definition towards supporting the preservation of natural components and systems. The difference between the two definitions will be further discussed below (par. 2.3).

There is a high degree of understanding within the National Commission for the fact that UNESCO has adopted the international definition – particularly given that there exists not only a lack of knowledge concerning the exact boundaries of the ecological support base but a great deal of uncertainty as well. This has led to

⁶ See, for example, UNESCO 171EX/7, Annex, dated January 2005: UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014: International Implementation Scheme (Draft). This text is quoted on various occasions below due to the relevance of the DESD for reflecting on the contributions from UNESCO to Sustainable Development.

the acceptance of the intertemporal – or intergenerational – aspect regarding current and future levels of satisfaction of human needs occupying a central position. The National Commission has three comments in this respect.

- 1) The intergenerational dimension implies that a significant responsibility lies with the current generations. In 1997, the General Conference of UNESCO adopted a Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations towards Future Generations⁷ that recognizes that current generations have the responsibility of ensuring that the needs and interests of future generations are ‘fully safeguarded’. Among other things, the declaration also states that current generations have the responsibility of leaving future generations a planet that has not been irreversibly damaged. ‘Each generation inheriting the Earth temporarily should take care to use natural resources reasonably and ensure that life is not prejudiced by harmful modifications of the ecosystems and that scientific and technological progress in all fields does not harm life on Earth’.
- 2) From the intergenerational perspective, attention must indeed be paid to the types of capital or sources of wealth that cannot simply be produced or reproduced: natural resources and ‘life support systems’. Indications can be seen in the scientific knowledge acquired from UNESCO programmes and other sources based on which the importance of dealing prudently with uncertainties becomes clear, particularly if the boundaries of ecosystems are exceeded and biodiversity is threatened. This last point leads, for example, to caution in the event of the threat of irreversible changes in the biosphere (cf. the so-called ‘precautionary approach’ in the Rio Declaration of 1992 and the Biodiversity Convention). If this is accepted the difference between the two definitions is largely negated.
- 3) In the vision of the DESD, sustainable development is ‘[...] linked to different models of social and economic development’ and involves rights and responsibilities, the social and economic relationships between people, etc. (see the Annex referred to above, p 14). Sustainable development also involves the capacity for developing alternative visions of development. The National Commission considers this searching for alternatives and the development of *the capacity to do* as extremely important for the way in which UNESCO can work towards sustainability and sustainable development.

⁷ Declaration on the Responsibilities of the Present Generations Towards Future Generations, adopted on 12 November 1997 by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 29th session.

2.2 Dimensions of sustainable development: the 3 'pillars'

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, Johannesburg, 2002) it was reaffirmed that 3 dimensions of sustainable development can be distinguished: ecological, social and economic. Since that time, these dimensions have become known as the 'three pillars of sustainable development'. In principle, the UNESCO texts cited here have accepted these three pillars. In this respect, 'Culture' is sometimes mentioned as an underlying dimension, and sometimes as an element that is to be found in all three dimensions. Whether the main focus is placed on the intergenerational aspect of sustainable development or on its environmental protection side, in both instances it is clear that a cultural support base is crucial to the realization of sustainable development.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) has argued (in 2002⁸) for returning to the old definition of sustainable development as 'ecologically compatible societal activity' and not taking into account any aspects that are not directly connected to this. This would be restrictive – in the opinion of the National Commission – and would signify a great step backwards in international terms. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the ecological aspect is one of the central dimensions.

The way in which 'culture' is treated in sustainable development and DESD documents is examined in further detail in paragraph 3 below.

2.3 Sustainable development elaborated somewhat further⁹

To understand the discussion of sustainable development, it is important for us to remember that this originally started because of concern for the robustness of the biosphere as a support base for economic development. Later this was expanded to allow the discussion to become international – and even global – whereby the focus shifted onto sustainable growth in prosperity and even well-being. This expansion was by nature a compromise (to keep the dialogue open – particularly with third-world countries), but the result was an unmistakably endless discussion that was again cut somewhat short by the intervention of the UN Secretary General in 2002¹⁰.

These historic roots resonate strongly in the WCS definition referred to above, according to which sustainable development is, within the boundaries set by ecosystems, 'improving the quality of human life *while living within the carrying capacity of supporting*

⁸ Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) 2002. Duurzame Ontwikkeling: Bestuurlijke Voorwaarden voor een Mobiliserend Beleid. SDU Uitgevers Den Haag, 2002.

⁹ See also, for example, the result of an earlier UNESCO Netherlands project: Opschoor, Hans (2003). 'Sustainability: a robust bridge over intertemporal societal divides?' In: Seters, P., B. de Gaaij Fortman and A. de Ruiter (ed.): Globalization and its New Divides: Malcontents, Recipes and Reforms. Dutch University Press Amsterdam: pp. 79-99.

¹⁰ He called on the WSSD to focus on the problems surrounding the subjects of water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity, thereby involving all three of the dimensions of sustainable development.

¹¹ See for example, the contribution of Charles Perrings in Koeman, J.H. and J.D. Schiereck (ed.), 2005. *Responsibilities of Environmental Research*. Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) Amsterdam.

ecosystems'. The internationally accepted 'Brundtland' definition, as noted, is a more anthropocentric view. The difference between the two can be summed up in terms of 'weak' versus 'strong' sustainability. In the first instance, (weak sustainability) the starting point is the fulfillment of human needs and sustainable development is at the least aimed at maintaining the minimum level of the total of manufactured, natural and human capital required to meet needs, regardless of whether this would lead to adverse effects on the ecosystems here and there. The assumption is that the various components of the total capital can be substituted for each other. In the second instance (strong sustainability) the starting point is the desire to conserve the natural capital (including biodiversity). The first standpoint conforms to the WCED definition; the latter is in line with that of the WCS. Although the intertemporal side is less prominent in the WCS definition it is, however, implicitly covered; the emphasis lies more on the limited possibilities for ecosystems to provide useful social services and to carry the pressure levied by social activities. It is good that UNESCO does not rule out a tighter definition, but the tension between the 'weak' (internationally accepted) and the 'strong' (WCS) definition should be recognized. In practice, as a rule intermediate positions are adopted that could more or less be qualified as either strong or weak.

Due to the aesthetic aspects implied in working towards sustainable development, it is important to ask for attention to be paid to the dynamic aspect of the empirics of (sustainable) development: do irreversible changes occur in the natural systems involved in human development, are there thresholds, bifurcations, etc? These 'system-ecological' aspects will not be treated further here¹¹.

Concern about the ecological repercussions of economic activities involves the central concepts of the contemporary economic development model, such as 'growth' and 'international trade systems'. In the environmental sciences sector (particularly environmental economics) there is ongoing discussion with institutions like the World Bank, and other major actors on the economic development stage, on the question of whether or not environmental degradation will slow down as a result of continuing economic growth or by itself (in other words through *endogenous* changes in social preferences and the like, and through induced technological development). Following on from an earlier debate (in which the economist Kuznets claimed to have discovered that with continued growth *inequality* would be reduced more

memorandum on 'culturally sustainable development' might be considered to imply.

Geertz defines culture as: '[...] a historically transmitted pattern of meaning, embodied in symbols; a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life'¹⁵. In this way, he emphasizes the importance of the process of conferring meaning. Approached in this way, it is logical, as far as a vision of the relationship between culture and sustainable development is concerned, that memoranda like *cultural diversity* and *the right to (domestic) development* are given an important place.

In the context of sustainable development, cultural diversity can be discussed in a variety of ways. In the first place, different cultures could have developed different praxes regarding how they deal with natural resources and their environment in a broader sense. An intercultural exchange simply at this technological level could already be of great importance in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Moreover, in different cultures the relationship between society-environment and natural resources could be looked at differently; it is important to be aware of (or discover) any such differences in perception. These differences could have an ideological basis or a material one. Thinking regarding the importance (or the rights) of future generations can be influenced by the average standard of living.

Furthermore, the intercultural and interreligious exchange about development and sustainability is significant (as reflected in the UNESCO programme). There has been an ongoing discussion for some time now at this latter level regarding 'cultural imperialism' and the propagation of one's own 'achievements', to which UNESCO (WCCD 1995) and, for example, the UNDP (2004) recently contributed.

3.2 Culture in the sustainable development pillars

In relation to the three pillars of sustainable development, culture is referred to as both 'an underlying dimension of' and 'inter-linkages' or 'inter-connections' (UNESCO 171EX/7, Annex p. 15) between the three 'key areas' or pillars of sustainable development. In fact, cultural elements are indeed present in each of the three pillars and often these are regarded as components of the horizontal cross-linkages between the pillars.

For example:

Under 'economic':

- the cultural aspects of consumption, overconsumption and over-development;
- globalization and cultural diversity;
- minorities/indigenous groups and economic development;
- the significance of cultural industries for (sustainable) development;
- corporate governance;
- the market as an institution.

Under 'social':

- cultural diversity as an asset;
- institutions in relation to cultures;
- values and culture;
- human rights;
- the gender perspective;
- governance.

Under 'ecological':

- local knowledge of biodiversity, ecosystems and the use of natural resources;
- the relationship between natural surroundings and social development (including large-scale vs. small-scale operations);
- vulnerability, disaster prevention and mitigation.

This summary is largely derived from DESD documents. Such lists definitely have room for improvement.

4. How to continue?

It is desirable to develop a clearer picture of the question of the role culture plays in the different sustainable development pillars and of the mutual interconnections. To this end, we would choose for an approach that uses the concept of *cultural diversity* as its starting point. The WCCD report referred to earlier concludes the following regarding the relationships between culture and the natural environment: 'Any approach which does no more than simply address strictly biophysical exchanges between societies and the environment – the impact of the environment on Man and vice versa – is incomplete and self-defeating. Instead, we need a culturally diversified approach which takes account of different attitudes to the environment and assesses whether these attitudes perpetuate views or actions that are beneficial or harmful to it'.

The following questions are of importance in such an approach¹⁶:

- What is the role played by the use of natural resources (for example, water) in existing cultures (including the Dutch) and how is this perceived within those cultures?
- How is sustainable development regarded in these cultures? How is the problem of the unsustainability of the applicable processes and patterns of development regarded and perceived, particularly in the Netherlands, and what are the experiences regarding the possibilities/impossibilities of steering these in a more sustainable direction? Are there developments in the perception of the relationship between natural resources (for example, water) and society?
- To what extent are the actual developments within these pillars in various cultures aimed at realizing sustainability?
- What are the adaptation and/or mitigation strategies regarding the specific problems of the interactions between humankind and the environment? What is the situation in societies that differ in terms of cultural mix and levels of development?
- Does the given cultural diversity contain sources that could strengthen the pursuit of sustainability in development processes? In this context: can intercultural and inter-religious dialogue be strengthened?
- Are there possibilities for finding best practices in the domestic (Dutch) society and of making these internationally (and/or inter-contextually and inter-situationally) available through internationally accessible and fed databases?
- How can sustainable development become embedded in the context of human rights, especially in ESC rights and collective rights?

¹⁶ The World Commission on Culture and Development, WCCD, (1995) in chapter 10 of its report regarding 'research needs', argues for a multidisciplinary approach that would be aimed at researching the evolution of different societies and cultures, at comparative research, and at the implementation of participatory methods, starting from the question of which 'policies' [policy strategies of various actors] would promote sustainable human development that would encourage various cultures to flourish?

These questions are not intended to be an agenda for the National UNESCO Commission or its working groups, but rather as a more or less logical framework within which activities of the Commission or its working groups, or other parties that see value in this framework, could be placed. As far as UNESCO itself is concerned, we envisage it contributing to the various fields of work (regarding research, particularly to the IHP, MAB, ICGP and MOST; and to the DESD for education), but we also see UNESCO as a forum for the exchange of new insights into sustainable development.

Currently, the National UNESCO Commission's Education Working Group is contributing to the DESD and this has resulted in a number of useful initiatives that are expected to continue to run (and have an effect)¹⁷. A particularly relevant point of view in this respect is: the development and offering of knowledge is an unsatisfactory condition for the internalization and realization of sustainable development. Interactive and participatory methods are important but have much room for improvement, and, at the organizational level, multidisciplinary partnerships are a condition for realizing sustainable development.

¹⁷ Reference is made to the thesis of C. Van Beilen (On Course: the contribution of lifelong learning to sustainable development, RUG, Aug. 2005) and others that are still in progress, and to the papers based on this (such as C. van Beilen, M. van der Kamp, S. Tebbes and J. Zeelen: Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Development, presented at the Conference 'Making Knowledge Work', University of Stirling, 25-28 Oct 2005), within the framework of a project of and with the University of Groningen and the Working Group on Education of Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO.

The Committee's Science Working Group is developing two projects in this context. The first is concerned with several aspects of the linkages between sustainable development, cultural diversity and human rights, i.e. a (limited) comparative approach to the development of so-called economic, social and cultural rights through to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals and (sustainable) development, and: legal pluralism and sustainable development fundamental rights. The second project, that links up with activities initiated earlier by the WGW in the fields of water, biodiversity and human needs, focuses on discussions about the differences in the perception of the value(s) of water. This could probably be of importance for the DESD too.

In addition, the desire has been voiced for an activity of (or initiated by) the UNESCO National Commission regarding the dialogue between cultures. In this connection, an attempt could be made to award an explicit place to sustainable development or themes related to sustainable development. An option related to this approach could be: responding to the discussion about sustainability in the Netherlands, whereby an attempt could be made to involve young people in a dialogue on the relationship between culture and economic growth.

These activities would together form an interesting whole that would easily fall into place within the entire context of the questions set out above. Moreover, they could constitute an effort by the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO that comprises all the working groups, using the 'red threads' of sustainable development and culture/cultural diversity.

In conclusion: such a cohesive programme could very well be presented at a meeting of potentially interested parties organized by the National Commission with a view to gaining feedback about the ideas of the Commission and the working groups, and on the other hand, to encourage wider cooperation in the fields of culture and sustainable development.

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