

French Commission for Sustainable Development

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ON CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The documentation on sustainable development rarely addresses the question of culture.

Yet sustainable development is a project that aims at nothing less than civilisation. The civilizing process – from the origins of humanity and still unfinished – has always depended upon culture: the spread of articulate languages, of practical knowledge, of rites, customs, and beliefs, of world-views, of drawings, constructions, crafts, inventions, accumulated empirical and theoretical knowledge, etc.... In other words, the progress of civilisation is inseparable from culture.

The human species distinguishes itself from other animals in that its members are both biological and cultural beings. Even our social nature, our mutual relations, are mediated by culture (which is not the case for the other social animals.) Culture is what enables a community to carry out plans for life together. Our humanity is defined by culture.

Initiatives in favor of sustainable development place man at the center of their concerns. Nevertheless, the three basic aspects of sustainable development have elaborated an understanding of man as an essentially biological being.

This is clearly the case with respect to sustainable development's environmental aspect (non-polluted air, water, and earth, biodiversity, etc.) The economic aspect mainly concerns the satisfaction of basic human needs (access to food, health, housing, etc.) The social aspect tends to address equality in the redistribution of wealth rather than qualitative relationships between people.

As a result other equally essential needs have been ignored, such as access to education, knowledge and to humanity's cultural resources, and the ability for every individual to develop his or her creativity.

Today "sustainable development" is a relatively ambiguous term, given the primarily economic connotation of the word "development". It is time to firmly assert that cultural development is just as essential for our common future.

The French Commission for Sustainable Development therefore insists that it is necessary to supplement our approach to sustainable development by including its cultural dimension on the same level as its economic, social and environmental dimensions.

Today cultural diversity is seriously threatened by globalisation, which tends to standardize our imaginations by spreading a single privileged cultural model across the entire planet. As much as bio-diversity appears vital for the Earth, our cultural diversity is just as essential for humanity, a treasure that must be guarded urgently.

The process of sustainable development is inconceivable without the active and constructive/creative protection of local cultural specificities, as it is without voluntarist investments that provide all people with access to cultures and their forms of expression.

Our human heritage, the diversity of our cultures, must be protected like our natural heritage, the biosphere, so that we may transmit them to future generations. Cultural diversity should be enriched by inter-cultural exchange and creativity, a process that permits each human being to create his or her relationship with others and with our world.

Over the past several years, a small group of multinational companies has moved to gather into a few hands:

- educational materials (textbook publishing, educational software...)
- production and distribution of information (press, television, internet)
- production and distribution of cultural goods (publishing, cinema, television, cable, music).

This process has put an ideological monopoly into place whose aims, at best, are purely market-oriented. Education teaches children to consume and provides them with no critical distance. News services can manipulate minds. Culture may lose all depth to become simple entertainment, based on values derived only from the liberal, productivist system.

Those who master the ideological apparatus on a planetary scale hold real power, without any recourse to democracy; they shape minds. In the twentieth century, totalitarian states held the monopoly on the means of production and distribution of education, information and culture; today, this monopoly is a natural complement of globalisation.

Like the natural elements, culture is a “common good” for all humankind, which cannot be the object of a generalized commercialization. The French Commission for Sustainable Development would like the inalienable quality of the cultural domain to be taken into account. The relay for such a political position should be found at a European and an international level.

In the Northern nations, technological progress and a constant growth in productivity have allowed individuals more availability for cultural activities, thanks to the global reduction of working hours. Such activities can be excellent instruments for personal growth and self-realization, and can aid the development of democracy; or, on the contrary, they can lead to a disastrous leveling-down.

In a society based on the notion of sustainable development, each individual should be able to realize his or her own life, rather than submitting to it. To this end, he or she must

have access to an initial education, and must be involved in a lifelong process of continuous education and cultural enrichment, along any number of avenues. Every human being, across the social scale, should be offered the ability to become a cultural producer/ actor and to overcome the status of a simple consumer of entertainment.

In this manner, humankind's cultural wealth would constantly grow richer and the process of civilisation would be reinforced.

It is essential for the future of humanity that we support and develop cultural practices that are free, diverse and open to all. This is a necessary condition for any social model that can be truly labeled sustainable.