

Chapter 6

Sustainable Development From a “Nature vs. Nurture” Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the role of nature and nurture in shaping the behavior of human beings toward sustainability identifying instances of both dramatic extinctions of species and collapse of entire societies, as well as successful, peaceful, and healthy adaptation of human communities to their environment, in an attempt to presents the imperative conditions necessary for attaining sustainable development. A very long and intriguing history reveals that from the nature’s point of view humans are rather destructive, interested in their own short-term survival. Nevertheless, the same long history of human species bears valuable lessons and examples of adaptive behaviors grounded by nurture, and based on these examples, the chapter aims at advancing a new perspective of thinking sustainable development that could lay the foundation of a new education curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

We have entered the Anthropocene, without question. Some of the changes, for example those brought about by large reservoirs and megacities, are here to stay for hundreds if not thousands or even millions of years. We will simply have to get used to and find a way of living with such changes. But there are things we can and should change to keep improving human wellbeing and to avoid crossing potentially dangerous thresholds. Our strength as humans is the capacity to recognize problems, to understand them and to develop solutions. The final chapter of the Anthropocene story is yet to be written: the narrative will depend on our collective self-awareness and the capacity to correct our course, for the relentless pressure on our planet portends unprecedented destabilization. (Syvitski, 2012)

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Sustainable Development From a “Nature vs. Nurture” Perspective

Attaining sustainable development in our contemporary increasingly complex societies is of utmost importance for global entities, national-level political decision makers, and ordinary individuals, equally. Sustainability is simply defined as the capacity of an entity to ensure its survival without endangering the survival of future generations, thus touching upon the well-known “triple bottom line” of sustainability (Elkington, 1997). The definition points out to the three main interdependent domains of action that are necessary to ensure sustainability translated into economic growth, social development and environmental protection (Hitchcock & Willard, 2009). Finding global scale or locally applicable solutions to problems associated with economic development, environment protection and responsible exploitation of resources has become a critical goal of every development policy, pertaining to the very endurance of the human species on the long run. Nevertheless, national states or local communities continue to have severe difficulties in promoting both economic development and environmental protection, in spite of carefully planned national policies and strategies.

From nature’s perspective, human beings do not necessarily manifest a sustainable behavior, and examples of species going extinct for not being able to adapt to their environment are informative in this regard. At the same time, various societies have succeeded in identifying, promoting and manifesting adaptive behaviors, ensuring the peaceful and successful acclimatization to a specific environment. What these latter societies seem to have and do differently refer to a set of cultural values and norms reflected in a respected and promoted “traditional knowledge”, defined as valuable information resulted from a long process of thinking and *tested in the rigorous laboratory of survival* (Hunn, 1993, p. 13). Traditional societies are collectivist societies, primarily interested in the survival of the community rather than the survival of the individual, which use culture and its carriers (among which, traditions, moral and social norms, religion, etc.) as an instrument of social control.

Numerous examples of traditional knowledge used to ensure the long-term survival of a society’s members (Berkes, 2008, p. 28) are still instructive for any policy maker. For instance, populations living in tropical forest and in other habitats practice crop rotation to maintain the qualities of the soil; traditional pastoral societies use a complex system of alternation or transhumance for protecting the grazing areas; mountain people have long discovered terracing as a method to conserve soil and water; almost all societies have discovered and instituted taboos and various utilization procedures to protect animals, plants and places. In such societies, the traditional knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation through socialization, rule observance is ensured by interiorization and group monitoring, and the breaking of the rules is informally sanctioned at the level of the primary group, mainly the extended family.

Nevertheless, in current modern individualistic societies traditions, religion and customary rules are considered obsolete and harshly debated, primary groups, especially the family and the elders, have lost their authority over the younger generations, and the social control is exerted by secondary, formal contractually based groups, which watch over law observance and apply formal sanctions.

The main objective of the chapter is to elaborate on examples of both adaptive and maladaptive behaviors of individuals and societies that led to either their self-destruction or their beneficial adaptation to the environment in an attempt to identify the elements that were essential for survival and endurance. At the same time, the chapter presents the role and importance of both nature and nurture in directing the behavior of human beings towards sustainability, with a particular focus on culture and education as valuable and yet insufficiently exploited sources of adaptive behaviors, in an attempt to promote a new perspective of thinking sustainable development, that could provide the foundation of a more efficient informal and formal education.

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