

Sustainable Development

Religious Contributions

What contribution can religious groups make to the debate on sustainable development?

Introduction

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro produced Agenda 21, which put forward proposals for sustainable development.

On the eve of the summit of 2002, however, it seems, from the report released by the World Wildlife Fund, that development is less sustainable than it was 10 yrs ago, and that at the present rate of consumption we will need two more planets the size of earth in order to sustain development for even the next fifty years. According to this report, more than a third of the natural world has been destroyed over the last three decades. We are not getting any nearer to the goal of sustainable development: on the contrary, it is receding from us at an increasing rate.

The contents of this report may be disputed, and described by some as exaggerated and alarmist, but other reports too indicate that there has been little progress in reaching the goal of sustainable development. The World Bank's recent Extractive Industries Review (EIR) was condemned by NGO's and civil society organisations in Budapest for not merely failing to achieve its goals but for exacerbating the problems it was intending to solve.

Is there any hope that the goals of sustainable development can be achieved?

Can religious groups and organisations play any part in helping to achieve it?

Public participation and Religious groups

It has been suggested that if sustainable development is to be achieved, three dimensions need to be kept in balance:

- Social Equality
- Ecological Integrity
- Economic growth

And without public participation in making decisions about various projects they are unlikely to be in balance.

Agenda 21 calls for participation by NGO's and other groups in civil society, though religious groups are not specifically mentioned.

27.1. Non-governmental organisations play a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy. Their credibility lies in the responsibility and constructive role they play in society. Formal and informal organisations, as well as grass-roots movements should be recognised as partners in the implementation of Agenda. The nature of the independent role played by non-governmental organisations within a society calls for real participation; therefore independence is a major attribute of non-governmental organisations and is the precondition of real participation.

27.2. One of the major challenges facing the world community as it seeks to replace unsustainable development patterns with environmentally sound and sustainable development is the need to activate a sense of common purpose on behalf of all sectors of society. The chances of forging such a sense of purpose will depend on the willingness of all sectors to participate in genuine social partnership and dialogue, while recognising the independent roles, responsibilities and special capacities of each.

It is precisely in the area of public participation that religious organisations could make an important contribution. Religious groups can make their members more aware of the issue, mobilise their members and encourage them to be more active participants.

To be effective, however, this process should have begun immediately after the Rio summit and should have continued in preparation for the Johannesburg Summit.

It would be unfair to say that *nothing* has been done in between. Many religious groups have been concerned with issues related to sustainable development, and have arranged activities to increase awareness in the orthodox church, for example, the Syndesmos youth organisation has arranged work camps and conferences for young people from all over the world, dealing with ecological and environmental themes, usually arranged in cooperation with monasteries. But such activities have not influenced the majority of church members, most of whom are not even aware of these efforts. Other religious groups could probably tell similar stories.

Africa

In Africa the deterioration has probably been worse than in many other places. Poverty, disease and hunger continue to ravage the continent. Much of the economic development in Africa is concentrated in extractive industries, in which raw materials are exported to other countries for processing, and create little wealth for the Africans, except for wealthy elites. Attempts to open markets for African products in Europe and North America have been disappointing.

Diseases like tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/Aids have ravaged the continent, and have often affected the most skilled and economically active people. The death rate among economically active people has soared in the last decade, and many children are left as orphans, unable to gain skills and education for themselves.

Aid and projects for economical upliftment are often strangled by bureaucratic corruption, which is endemic in some parts of Africa. In South Africa government leaders have called on religious bodies to work for the moral regeneration of the nation. As parasitic diseases like malaria weaken the bodies of individuals and reduce their productivity and general quality of life, so corruption weakens the body politic, and reduces the quality of life of whole societies.

Ordinary people in Africa are trapped in a cycle of poverty and are unable to escape. Sometimes a whole family depends on the income of a single pensioner. When the pensioner dies, it is a disaster for the family. In Zimbabwe, there has been a deliberate government policy to encourage small-scale peasant agriculture at the expense of commercial farming, but this has resulted in great hardship for urban workers, who cannot afford the steep increase in food prices. Also, many of the commercial farms that have been subdivided are not used productively for agriculture, but are simply used as residences for people who compete for the decreasing number of jobs in towns.

“People farming” has become common in South Africa too, as smallholdings are not used for productive agriculture, but are simply sub-divided and sub-let to people for residential purposes, and so the people join the ranks of the periurban unemployed.

The role of religious bodies in Africa

Most religious groups have engaged in various forms of poverty relief, and healing ministry. The poverty relief often takes the form of individual alms giving. Some have also run orphanages, clinics and hospitals.

Most of these activities, however, do not constitute progress towards sustainable development, but rather take the form of compensating for the lack of it. Almsgiving is, in effect, a redistribution of wealth and resources from the richer members to the poorer members of the community. The problem, however, is that the pool of available resources is diminishing, and even this process may not be sustainable indefinitely.

Most religions have an ethical component, and many of the problems in achieving sustainable development have an ethical root. The “moral regeneration” called for by South African political leaders is important here, but moralising sermons are not likely to achieve the goal either. A few years ago there was a study in South Africa on the moral and ethical values of a group of South African businessmen, and the study showed that there was virtually no correspondence between their religious affiliation and their values. This indicates that religious groups are not very effective in inculcating their moral and ethical values into their members. Recently there has been a lot of publicity about the failure of many religious leaders to follow the sexual ethics of their religions, and this seems to apply in other areas of ethics as well. If leaders cannot live according to their professed ethical values, how can the ordinary members be expected to do so?

Religion, ethics and sustainable development

In spite of the gloomy picture of failure in the last few paragraphs, there is a way forward.

Religious groups could make a concerted effort to study the relationship between their systems of ethics and values in society that are not compatible with sustainable development. They should also study the values in society that are not compatible with sustainable development, and see how these relate to the ethical values of their members.

In some parts of Africa, for example, there is a belief that sexual intercourse with a virgin is a cure for Aids, and this has led to an increase in child rape. Rape, especially of children, is contrary to the ethical values of just about every religious group, yet this belief persists, contrary to the values that people profess.

One of the values that is widely promoted in society, yet threatens the goals of sustainable development, is greed. Much advertising is based on the premise that greed is good and that it is acceptable to most people. Yet it is contrary to the ethics and values of most religions. Recently a prominent South African sportsman, the cricketer Hansie Cronje, was at the centre of a corruption scandal, in the course of which it emerged that his religious values had been confused by accepting greed. People profess many religions or none, but one might ask whether the most widely-accepted religion of all has no name, but is based on the value of greed. We could give a name to this religion, and call it Moneytheism, since it expresses the most deeply held values of many people.

Religions and religious groups therefore need to examine their ethical values, and those of the societies in which their members live, and see which values help and hinder the goals of sustainable development, and help to make their members more aware of these. This could then provide the foundation for greater public participation, which is vital if the goals of sustainable development are to be achieved.

**His Eminence Archbishop Seraphim
Archbishop of Johannesburg and Pretoria,
Greek Orthodox Patriarchate**