

The Ethics of Planning for Sustainability

Introduction

Buddhist ideas and principles are the foundation for the discussion in this paper. It is our hope that these ideas will provide new insights and fresh perspectives on the present debate.

An Ethical Basis for a Policy of Sustainability

Morality can be defined as conduct that seeks to avoid harm to oneself and others. Conduct that knowingly or intentionally causes harm to others is therefore immoral.

Unsustainability, for example through excessive pollution or excessive use of non-renewable resources, will eventually lead to a reduction of our present standard of living. Future generations may not even be able to meet their own needs. Most people would agree that a decline in living standard – and certainly an inability to meet one's own needs – is unwelcome, and therefore a form of harm. Given the above definition, unsustainability is therefore immoral. Only through sustainable development is our moral integrity not compromised.

Some Values That May Undermine Sustainability

Before attempting to answer the question of what values support sustainable development, it might be useful to briefly look at the values and beliefs that underpin unsustainable development. When the values that are at the root of unsustainability are better understood, it will be easier to formulate values that support sustainability. The values that give rise to unsustainability include:

- “Man versus Nature”-
It is a common perception that humans are in an adversarial relationship with nature. Nature is often looked upon as needing to be tamed and brought under control so as to yield maximum benefit to humans.
- “More is Better”-
A common assumption at the root of our present economic order is that human happiness is largely proportional to how much we consume. Thus increase and maximisation of consumption becomes our most important social objective.
- “Greed is Good”-
Greed is sometimes seen as a virtue because, it is argued, it encourages effort and achievement and thus economic growth.

It is not difficult to see how these values, if left unconstrained by other values, will tend to lead to unsustainable development.

Why These values Do Not Work

- The “man versus nature” outlook forgets that ultimately human beings are part of nature; we are inextricably linked to and interrelated with the natural environment. By pursuing unsustainable policies with regard to the natural environment we are undermining our own long term welfare.
- The idea that “more is better” is founded on a shallow understanding of human psychology. Human desires are without limits; even if consumption were to increase indefinitely, lasting satisfaction would still not be achieved.
- Greed is *not* good for two reasons. Firstly, greed hampers one’s ability to make ethical decisions. Greed leads to skewed perceptions that favour short term fulfilment of one’s desires over long term ethical commitments. Secondly, as already mentioned, greed does not work because human desires are limitless – no lasting satisfaction can be found through consumption.

A Set of Alternative of Supplementary Values that Support Sustainability

As the unsustainability of our present models of development are getting better understood, the above values, standing alone, are clearly unethical (in accordance with our definition of morality above). It is thus necessary to look for new values that can counterbalance these values and that are based on the ethics of sustainability.

Such Values may include:

- **Harmony with nature-**
As argued above, it does not make sense to live in opposition to nature; rather we should live in harmony with it. A Buddhist metaphor states that we should “collect wealth as a bee collects nectar from flowers”. The idea conveyed by this metaphor is to make as small an impact on nature as possible while still harnessing natural resources for our own welfare.
- **More is not always best-**
Deep and lasting happiness is not achieved through consumption, but through such qualities as morality and generosity. Morality and generosity lead to a lack of remorse, a sense of self esteem in practice, it can be a source of happiness.
- **Greed is Ultimately futile-**
The “greed is good” idea loses much of its appeal when we realise the futility of trying to satisfy all our desires through ever rising consumption. Given this realisation sustainability becomes a more acceptable proposition.

The following values are also likely to support sustainability:

- **Compassion-**
Other humans suffer in much the same way we do. By putting ourselves in the position of other beings, it is possible to feel sympathy for those who might experience the unpleasant results of unsustainable development.

- Treating others fairly-
We are today making decisions that will affect future generations. We thus have a serious responsibility to ensure that they do not suffer hardship as a consequence of our decisions. Future generations should be treated as we ourselves would like to be treated.
- “Ethical Progress” Should be encouraged, not just economic progress-
A moral person normally experiences a sense of well-being. Our society would do well to encourage a higher level of morality.
- “Contentment is the highest wealth”-
This is another Buddhist principle. When we are content, assuming that our basic needs are met, we do not desire anything and we experience a sense of peace. Such contentment is the opposite of always trying to gratify our desires. Again, an appreciation of this simple truth supports sustainability.

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