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The Ethical Foundation For Planning A More Sustainable Future

Introduction: Ethical Foundations

The fundamental ethical values society should embody and thus promote through the actions of its defining institutions are the building of community between people and the protection of the natural environment. In this way is the full spectrum of God's creation at least protected and ideally strengthened.

The Necessity of Sustainability

This observation leads to two reflections on the necessity of sustainability being the first and most important factor government should consider in any planning for the future of society.

First, unsustainable exploitation of the environment to meet human needs ultimately is also destructive of human community. Overexploitation of nature's bounty destroys employment opportunities over the longer term and sets people against each other as they are forced to compete ever more viciously for what little nature can still provide.

Second, it is not enough to change production practices to create a sustainable future. The way people live, and the way that drives consumption patterns and patterns of social interaction, must also be changed. At this point in time human settlements are, in general, planned in ways that encourage the creation of unsustainable demand for natural resources and that isolate people from each other rather than bring them together.

Recommendations for Government Policy

First, government must act preventively to ensure that renewable natural resources are not exploited to such an extent that they can no longer regenerate themselves. Likewise, wherever possible, reliance on non-renewable resources should be replaced by sustainable exploitation of renewable resources. This will protect not only the physical environment but also employment and human community.

However, such change to the way we currently exploit our environment for the provision of human needs cannot be rapid and painless. Sustainability must ultimately be a human project as well as an environmental project or else it is doomed to failure. Sustainability must be an inclusive project that actively finds a place for those in the new order who formerly made their living through unsustainable environmental practices.

Therefore generous assistance must be provided to those who bear the short-term cost of shifting society to a more sustainable environmental footing. Generous financial provision must also be made for those on low incomes who will undoubtedly face higher prices for many goods and services under a true sustainability policy. Many goods and services prices have been artificially low due to the unsustainable environmental exploitation that has underlain their production. Inevitably these prices, including especially for many utilities, will rise under a true sustainability policy.

Second, sustainability must encompass changes to current modes of urban planning. The way human settlements are planned must be changed both to reduce their 'environmental footprint' and to encourage greater interaction, and indeed interdependence, between people in the localities where they live. True sustainability is both a human and environmental project.

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