Vicarious Ethics: Politics, Business, and Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT. An historical overview of the United Nations sustainable development initiative reflects a convergence of political and ethical concerns, and a need to incorporate business and the ethics of business into an inclusive perspective. Underlying all of the resolutions and recommendations ensuing from that initiative is the age-old question of “the one and the many,” with which theology and philosophy have grappled for centuries, and sociology and politics in more recent times. Inherent to sustainable development is a need to overcome that question, especially with respect to the power of the wealthier nations. Good old American Pragmatism offers a solution which, at once, respects individual and communal sovereignty while positing a dynamic interaction between the two. That interaction offers an optimistic approach to global business and to global business ethics.

KEY WORDS: sustainable development, United Nations, pragmatism

Introduction

The issues of sustainable development, environmental effects of continuing industrialization, and increasing population have caused world leaders in the fields of politics as well as industry to pause and to examine the directions in which both politics and economics need to travel as we embark upon the Twenty-First Century. It has become increasingly evident that current practices cannot be permitted to continue without substantive change, both with regard to the uneven rates of development with regard to the nations of the North and of the South, and in light of a burgeoning world population placing ever increasing demands on very finite, and often irreplaceable, natural resources. Natural phenomena are exacerbated by irrational human actions, including the oppressive results of hundreds of years of colonialism, actions of wealthy and extremely powerful multinational corporations, and policies of North nations seeking to retain a maximum of political as well as economic power, including such policies as a firm refusal to transfer technological information.

Even in the South, widespread corruption, especially of a significant number of leaders who, for reasons of ideology or, perhaps, personal gain, actually create a two-tiered society within their nations: themselves as the first tier, really a part of the economic system of the North, and the remainder of the population suffering the effects of membership in the South. For instance, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTDAD) “still maintains that developing states are caught in a perpetual cycle of poverty and underdevelopment because of their disadvantaged position in the international division of labor” (Pease, 188). Professor Pease continues, “Their export income is derived from low-profit primary products rendering them vulnerable to economic expansions and contractions in the global economy” (Pease, 188).

Professor Howard Handelman has defined this poverty as “manifested at the national level by some
combination of low per-capita income..., highly unequal income distribution, poor infrastructure..., limited use of modern technology, and low consumption of energy." He added: "At the household level, economic under-development connotes widespread poverty, including unemployment, substandard housing, poor health conditions, and inadequate diet" (Handelman, 3).

In his "Forward" to the Human Development Report 2000, of the United Nations Development Program, Mark Malloch Brown, that organization's Administrator, notes: "to be poor is to be powerless and vulnerable. Life remains a torment for children in the teeming barrio of a developing country city, for refugees caught up on a conflict, for women in a society that still denies them equality and freedom – every day brings physical and psychological threats. And still too may of the 1.2 billion people living on less than a dollar a day lack even the most basic human security (2000 Human..., iii–iv).

In his introduction to the 2000–2001 World Development Report of the World Bank, President James D. Wolfensohn noted that, "[A]t the start of a new century, poverty remains a global problem of huge proportions. Of the world’s 6 billion people, 2.8 billion live on less than $2 a day, and 1.2 billion on less than $1 billion a day." Concerning those among the most vulnerable, he added, "Six infants of every 100 do not see their first birthday, and 8 do not survive to their fifth. Of those who do reach school age, 9 boys in 100, and 14 girls, do not go to primary school." (World Development..., vi.).

In 1972, the United Nations held its first Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, Sweden, 5–16 June. That gathering "was the first occasion on which the political, social, and economic problems of the global environment were discussed at an intergovernmental forum with a view to actually taking corrective action." In addition, "It intended to launch a new liberation movement to free humans from environmental perils of their own making, and while the ‘no-growth’ concept was not a viable policy for any society, the traditional concepts of the basic purposes of growth needed to be thought." The meeting heightened immeasurably the consciousness of environmental concerns and led to the establishment of the United Nations program for environmental protection (India, “The Road…: Stockholm…”).

A generation later, at the call of the United Nations General Assembly, the nations once again gathered, at the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3–14 June. Among the principal purposes of that gathering were:

- The establishment of concrete strategies that would ensure broad-based environmentally sustainable development; and
- forming foundations for global partnerships between the developing and the industrialized worlds while focusing on mutual needs and common interests of both thus, ensuring a healthy future for the planet (India, “The Road…: 1992...”).

At that meeting, the more developed nations established specific agenda items and promised significant increases in assistance in the development process as well as the urgent and imminent need to protect the environment while creating a pattern of "sustainable" growth. While there was not total agreement in all areas, delegates took note of the pervasive and dehumanized poverty of the South, and of the economic structures and conditions leading to the perpetuation of that poverty. They endeavored to establish agendas and set time-specific goals, for the implementation of programs to alleviate at least the worst effects of the South’s grinding conditions of poverty, while at the same time, ensuring growth which would protect the earth’s environment and its future.

Two specific results of this conference were Agenda 21, “a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally... in every area in which human [development] impacts on the environment,” and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (U.N., “Agenda 21”). This summit meeting concluded "that nothing less than a transformation of our attitudes and behaviour would bring about the necessary changes... The message reflected the complexity of the problems facing us: that poverty as well as excessive consumption by affluent populations place damaging stress on the environment." There can be no question but that “[g]overnments recognized the need to redirect international and national plans and policies to ensure that all economic decisions fully took into account any environmental impact” (U.N., “The Earth Summit”). In December of that