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Baird Reflective Essay

I define sustainability in much broader terms than environmental sustainability, the concept that often comes to mind when one hears the word “sustainability”. Quite simply, I look at sustainability as defined by the Oxford English dictionary, which describes it as the capability of “being maintained or continued at a certain rate or level”.[[1]](#endnote-1) I then apply this to the realms of culture, the environment, and society. As an international studies major, sustainability comes up in my work in relation to the concept of sustainable development. This is in part due to the nature of my concentration- “globalization and sustainability” which combines environmental and social sustainability with global economic trends. For me, **sustainable development is achieved when a community/society progresses forward through means which can be maintained to reach a self-defined end state without the initial means degrading the achievement of the ultimate goal**. The obvious example of such progress would be the utilization of an energy portfolio free of dependence on fossil fuels, which could hurt development trajectories in the future. Another example would be pathways which consider basic human rights and needs as development which routinely violates human rights could lose traction and stall as society members begin to resist. Additionally, I see sustainable development as necessarily adaptable by smaller-scale communities to fit their needs, even if a general development plan might need to be adopted at the national level.

The fact that the progress is self-defined is essential as I cringe at the common practice of Western/well-off actors defining what all cultures and societies should seek and then “helping” them to achieve this. I realize this practice is not universal, but it is prevalent. Such a practice fails to engage local stakeholders in development processes which is risky as once funding dries up and/or outsiders lose interest and return home, it is the community which carries on the development process, and not necessarily the national government. Another risk is inspiring active efforts to reject outsider-imposed development work, thus making it impossible to maintain the forced development pathway. Lastly, regardless of how much training and schooling an outsider has completed, the community best understands its own interests. The importance of traditional and local knowledge cannot be stressed enough.

As an example, we can look at the common practice of converting subsistence farming to industrial agriculture without the leadership of local community members and stakeholder buy-in. Subsistence farmers whose families have been working the land for generations have a much longer institutional memory of weather and pest patterns which can be built upon to improve resiliency to a changing climate. Ignoring this knowledge and, for example, imposing industrial agriculture and foreign strains of crops could disenfranchise previously-employed farmers, forcing rural-to-urban migration, literally depleting the community of its members. Foreign crops and practices could also decrease community resilience as compared to local practices as they fail to consider and address unforeseen local threats to crop success. Furthermore, foreign practices are not even environmentally sustainable in the localities in which they were formed, often resulting in depleted resources such as fresh water and soil nutrients and the inevitability of environmental degradation, thus failing to reach an end goal of a productive agricultural system.

Besides my concentration within the international studies major, my understanding of sustainable development stems from my participation in the past three UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conferences of the Parties (COPs 20,21,22). Because every nation-state party has a place at the negotiating table within the UNFCCC (although the wealthier tend to have a much stronger voice than the “developing), witnessing the COPs and agreements unfold in a more collaborative effort between nations rather than “developed” nations (for lack of a more appropriate label) imposing their development model on “undeveloped/developing” nations. Although developed nations do not stop prescribing development models for other states, they are not advocating that the development models of the industrial revolution and the past 200 years, as this model is responsible for the climate change predicament we find ourselves in. Instead, the message is that developing countries need to chart new development paths in order to avoid heavy greenhouse gas emissions and further global warming. The difference between this and other prescribed development situations is that developing countries have the chance to fight back and argue for their own development pathways, sustainable as defined by themselves. Additionally, it is not that countries are arguing for carbon-intensive unsustainable development, but rather that they require funds and technological innovations transferred from wealthier countries in order to make these development pathways more possible. Witnessing first-hand discussions about insider-driven development versus imposed development models has solidified my understanding of the importance of self-driven development models in achieving environmental, social, and cultural sustainability. This understanding was further set in stone during my senior seminar, “Poverty and Globalization”, where I looked at scholarship and debates surrounding development methodologies and philosophies.

This understanding will undoubtedly follow me in future careers and educational endeavors. Next year as I pursue a Master of Laws in Human Rights and the Environment, two topics quintessential in sustainable development discussions, my coursework will further my understandings of what it means to sustain both human rights institutions and the environment in which we live. Having already studied in Jordan and Denmark, I look forward to working towards my LL.M. in England as it offers yet another perspective from which to view the world. Furthermore, my experiences at the past three COPs have taught me a key consideration that international regimes offer every state a spot at the negotiating table. Excluding parties, either rich or poor, affects the sustainability of progress, whether on the scale of a tiny village achieving goals of more resilient agriculture or the global community’s efforts to mitigate and adapt to global climate change.

1. "sustainable, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 9 April 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)