64. Ethics as a core driver of sustainability in the Caribbean

by
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The José Martí Project for World Solidarity is addressing environmental issues in the Caribbean from a political and ethical perspective. The region is especially vulnerable to climate change. Concern about the environment varies even at the community level, depending on how close people live to the resources they rely on for their livelihoods. Yet local islanders have been excluded from devising responses to environmental degradation.

Ethics and sustainability

Sustainability is a political process and cannot be achieved by applying scientific knowledge alone. Many individuals and groups are involved, including national and local government, academics, the private sector and civil society, all with conflicting social and economic interests. Sustainability is also shaped by our values and belief systems and the moral outcomes we each want to achieve. Diverse and contradictory perspectives are inevitable. There will always be competing views of what is "right" or "wrong" concerning decisions about the environment and subsequent public action and development outcomes.

We do, of course, need decisions on sustainability and global environmental change. Garvey (2008) maintains that the problem is how to identify a rationale for action, and that while scientific, economic and social factors are important, the "right" answer is largely shaped by ethical considerations. Ethics should be the core driver of sustainability.

Focus on Caribbean states

According to UNESCO (2011), global environmental change is having a disproportionate impact on Caribbean states. Food security, housing, agricultural production, coastal ecosystems, tourism – the very fabric of social, economic and cultural life – are all affected.

José Martí Project

Several institutions in the region are working holistically to achieve sustainability, including the Jose Marti Project for World Solidarity. The project was set up in 2002, with support from UNESCO, to address the serious problems confronting humanity.

It includes representatives of different regions and is open to all religions, philosophies and beliefs of universal humanism. A Cuban national hero, Martí was an important social and political thinker in the late 1800s and forefather of independence in the region. He aimed to develop a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature, and supported public education, social justice and inclusion. Freedom, liberty and democracy are prominent in his work. His ideas about what is now called sustainable development offered a rich foundation for collaboration between the societies of North and South America in tackling environmental problems (Castro, 2001).

Since 2012, the José Martí Project has focused on improving policy responses to global environmental change in the Caribbean. It assists social science networks and civil society to rethink development processes in relation to climate change. Collaboration between social scientists, civil society and policymakers speaking different languages in distinct regions and sub-regions is an important part of the process.

The José Martí project prioritises participatory, community-based thinking, and aims to integrate environmental, social and economic issues within a long-term perspective. There are many different ways to achieve this based on multiple goals and perspectives, but the crux is to have a strong moral and ethical foundation.

The project has identified the following ethical issues as being pertinent to formulating policy on sustainability at national and regional levels:

- A rights-based perspective is crucial to transcending the limited but still dominant economic approach to development (Puig, 2013), as Amartya Sen's work shows (1999).

- Given the serious impact that climate change is having on people's livelihoods and the environment, a concerted effort at the international level is morally imperative (Naraine, 2013).

- Ethical concerns about scientific knowledge relate to the use or misuse of scientific knowledge and to people's moral duty to act, or not act, on available knowledge. Who is responsible for improving data-gathering networks to ensure information is accurate? Should we mitigate against the risk of information not being accurate enough? What do we do about knowledge gaps (Naraine, 2013)?

The project recommends that at regional and national level, island states consider the following key ethical issues in formulating policy for sustainability:

- A process of political negotiation on sustainability outcomes that articulates the relevant ethical issues at the island, or even community, level is preferable to a universal approach across the Caribbean. Public authorities, business managers and other decision-makers must consider citizens' attitudes toward new, large-scale economic activities when planning resource management. This is essential because people's beliefs, concerns and behaviours vary according to how close they are to the resources critical for sustaining their livelihoods, such as coastal zones and wetlands (Baptiste and Nordenstam, 2009).

- Socially inclusive and equitable sustainability with solid ethical foundations requires new forms of social learning, such as participatory engagement at the community level.

- More people are getting involved in devising responses to environmental degradation in the Caribbean states. This should mean that people who have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes now have more opportunities to share their opinions.

- Everyone, no matter where they live, has a responsibility towards the environment. However, their obligations may differ, reflecting uneven social and economic

circumstances, diverse historical contributions to global environmental problems, and various levels of ability to address environmental issues. Given this generally accepted concept of common but differentiated responsibilities (United Nations, 1992), the unique vulnerabilities of Caribbean island states should be weighed in any model of shared responsibilities.

- To be effective, international co-operation for sustainability needs to focus on individual island states within the Caribbean. Capacity building should be about developing knowledge and expertise, strengthening links between local organisations, engaging the local community, and involving academia and industry in community life.

- Caribbean island governments need to assess environmental and social demands from civil society – including marginalised groups – effectively through participatory policy processes, as Castro (2013) has pointed out.

The development of a shared vision is essential to allow Caribbean states to pursue effective sustainability policies. This will require integrating the complex processes of ecological degradation with the similarly intricate processes of human development. It must include philosophical and moral judgements to help define the relationship between humanity and nature.

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