

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

Ethical Principles for Effectively Making It Happen

By Oscar Motomura

As specialist in management and governance, I have focused my energy in the last few years in what I consider to be the critical factor that defines the health of organizations, both public and private: their ability to make things happen. Therefore I have decided – in preparing this presentation – to choose one focus for the ethical principles related to sustainable development. This focus can be defined through the following key question:

- What are the most subtle, least obvious ethical principles that should receive the most attention if we want to be more effective in transforming models of non-sustainable development into models that are not only exceptionally sustainable, but also promote continuous evolution/improvement?

In order to be practical in developing this focus, I have decided to directly address the principles, instead of theorizing or commenting on the theme. Obviously, these principles are only suggestions and incentives for dialogue and debate, not only with regard to their content, but also relative to the manner in which they are expressed. They can and must be improved, based on contributions from everyone.

When composing these principles and the commentaries that contextualize them, I have also tried to adopt the perspective of leaders and statesmen representing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. But I believe that the principles I propose are fundamentally universal.

Principle 1: The Ethics of Effective Action

The ethics of effective action is the ethics of movement. Sustainable development only becomes reality through action. The principle here is that all deliberations about sustainability must include the definition of effective action in **all** areas that affect the excellence of the final outcome (in keeping with the ecological principles of interdependence and a systemic approach). Therefore, no deliberation about sustainable development should remain merely at the level of theoretical intentions, and

not take into account creative and efficient solutions that are capable of overcoming all barriers to effective implementation.

The premise here is that we already have sufficient knowledge, theories that are sufficiently well-founded, more than reasonable evidence, and suitable technologies to be able to make all the necessary decisions to point our development in the direction of a sustainability far greater than that which we have today. Our problem today lies in the absence of more pragmatic actions and in the speed of making things happen. It is not ethical to continue delaying actions that we already know are necessary.

For each day of postponement, it is possible to calculate the impacts on sustainability and the problems that are being created in the near and the long term.

Principle 2: The Ethics of Truthful Intention

The ethics of truthful intention is the ethics of non-manipulation, of the absence of conflict of interest, of the absence of the game of appearances and self-deception. The principle here is that all deliberations about sustainable development must be based on the intention to assure the best for everything and for everyone on the planet, in a manner that is fair and egalitarian, as transparent as possible, and always based on the real intention to make whatever is necessary happen (to effectively fulfill what is agreed to).

Therefore, no deliberation about sustainable development should take place in an environment of pressure (from lobbyists or special interest groups) that leads to problems of conflict of interest and that diverts decision-making processes from the noble and universal purposes inherent to the very concept of sustainability itself.

The premise here is that, in general, we live in an environment of self-deception and the inversion of values, in which we have come to accept as “normal” the game of promises we know will not be fulfilled, of back-room agreements, of hidden agendas behind apparently well-intentioned proposals, etc., all of which affect the sustainability of our evolution. Obviously, in no way is any of this ethical. Even less ethical is to close one’s eyes

to this reality and to do nothing about it, turning this game of illusions into a permanent phenomenon. The premise here is that this entire arrangement is reversible and that this turn-around is absolutely necessary in order to assure that sustainable development becomes an effective reality.

Principle 3: The Ethics of Genuine Respect

The principle here embodies the ethics of true respect – and not of respect that is institutionalized, generic, merely for the record – for every living creature on the planet. Sustainable development is only possible if this genuine respect is present in society as a whole. The principle here is that all deliberations that affect the sustainability of our evolution must be conducted by people who have a “vivid sensibility” in relation to the people who are affected by these deliberations and the living creatures involved. The principle here is that this sensibility cannot be based merely on reports, statistics, and numbers. The fundamental idea here is that these people must have direct, eyewitness experience, in order to achieve the level of respect necessary (thus avoiding decisions made on “automatic pilot”). No deliberation about sustainable development should be made by people in offices who do not have this direct experience.

The premise here is that when deliberations become “institutional” at both ends (on one side, an “organization” deliberates, and not people; on the other side is an “interest group,” and not people), they lose their sense of humanity, and become merely about “things.” The same can happen in relation to living creatures that lose their individuality and become mere statistics. It is not ethical to turn living creatures into things, making them unworthy of genuine respect, the kind of respect that we feel in relationship to people close to us, to our pets, to our plants.

Principle 4: The Ethics of Knowledge

The ethics of knowledge is the ethics of knowing what we are doing. It is the ethics of only making decisions in areas in which we have the necessary knowledge. It is the awareness of the risk of deliberating/deciding without this knowledge.

The principle here is that all deliberations that affect sustainable development be conducted by people who are ecologically literate, people who understand how the systems of the Earth work, how the principles that govern Nature work, how the “systemic” works in space and time. Therefore, no deliberation about sustainability should take place in any context if the people involved are not ecologically literate.

The premise here is that many problems of sustainability occur in the world merely because of the ignorance of decision makers, of those who implement decisions, etc. The premise is that our leaders and our politicians urgently need to be educated about the basics of what affects the sustainability of our total development. It is not ethical to make decisions without knowledge about causes. It is not ethical to oversimplify critical questions about sustainability using analogies from a mechanical, linear, reductionist worldview.

The premise here is also that, to the extent that a population as a whole is ecologically literate, sustainable development will tend to occur naturally, beginning at the base of society and moving upward. This is the ideal of a society that takes care of itself, including everything in relationship to sustainable development.

Principle 5: The Ethics of the Integration of Time

This principle refers to the ethics that honors the past together with the present and the future. The principle here is that deliberations that affect the sustainability of development should not simply begin with the present moment, forgetting about decisions made in the past that created the present situation. This means that it is also always essential to honor the systemic in relationship to time, and to see the greater whole. No deliberation about sustainability should take place without taking into account the systemic in time and space, that is, the question of legacies received and those that we will leave for future generations.

The premise here is that in many places on the planet natural resources have been depleted in exchange for a type of non-sustainable development – a development that is unsustainable, but capable of generating other assets, like technology and capital. When we see the whole – from a worldwide perspective – we see the effect of this unbalanced development that has even produced ghettos affecting billions of people. Many countries in Latin America suffer the effects of this imbalance, but, on the other hand, they are today in better circumstances in terms of ecological resources than the “developed” countries. Brazil, as one of the richest countries in the world in natural resources, is a typical example. To honor the integration of time means to give due value to these natural resources that today are fundamental for the whole planet.

It is not ethical for countries that created non-sustainable development to simply demand the “preservation” of the natural resources of developing countries. This preservation now has a value for everyone. It is time to guarantee that all people who need these resources pay

for their preservation. And the cost will not be cheap. On the contrary, it will be significant given that now these resources have an inestimable value for the humanity, that is, “There is not enough money in the world...” The premise here, once again, is that in order to build a future that will be better for everyone and for the whole (which is key to sustainability), it is necessary to recognize the legacy we have received and the one that we intend to leave – always taking into consideration interdependence and a systemic perspective. In short, the whole.

Principle 6: The Ethics of Restoration

The ethics of restoration is the ethics of acknowledging mistakes and having the humility to fix them. The principle here is that all the mistakes that have been made in the whole world in terms of sustainability can be corrected.

Part of this correction is simply to stop making the same mistakes and let Nature do its part. Part of this correction is represented by activities of recuperation/restoration. It is to create conditions for the restoration of tropical forests, clean up polluted rivers, rescue animals from extinction, recover natural springs and clean them up when polluted. It is clear that some things may not be recoverable. But a great proportion may and must be recovered. It is the activity of fixing things and leaving them “ready for future generations to use.”

The premise here is that restoration is worthwhile and must be a systemic, global, integrated effort to the extent that it is in the interest of everyone. Will the investment for restoration be high? It could be, but we must consider the opportunity costs as well. What kinds of severe problems will we be avoiding in the future, for the planet as a whole, for the future generations of all peoples? What capital should be used for this restoration? Capital from the whole world, for the sake of the whole world. It is in everyone’s interest.

It is not ethical to accept the present state of things and give up. To restore Nature is a noble act of recognizing our mistakes. It is also to recognize the value of everything that may be key to the sustainable development of the planet.

Principle 7: The Ethics of the Intuitive

The ethics of the intuitive is the ethics that honors human perception. The principle here is that deliberations about sustainable development must honor the intuitive, the subjective, feelings, and not only what is technical, “scientific,” objective. No deliberation about sustainability should remain only at the level of the rational / intellectual, as if sustainability were an exact science.

The premise here is that we still have a lot to learn in

relationship to Nature when looking for the key to the sustainability of development. The idea here is not only to preserve Nature. It is to be a partner with Nature and to discover the secrets of sustainability together with her. It is to discover knowledge essential to the life contained in the Nature – essential knowledge that we can apply to the systems invented by human beings. When systems that are artificially created contain the “systemic wisdom” present in Nature, we will have achieved true sustainability.

It is not ethical to settle for the reductionism of the techno-scientific point of view. There is still more yet to be discovered than we have already proven scientifically. We will only be able to uncover this knowledge through imagination and intuition.

Principle 8: The Ethics of the Natural

The ethical principles considered here are those that come from natural or universal laws. The principle here is that we will only achieve real sustainable evolution when the planet as a whole is totally aligned to the universal laws of Nature. The principle here is that all deliberations that affect the sustainability of development need to be based on a deep knowledge of everything that governs Nature. These natural laws must always prevail over laws created by human beings, that are, in most cases, fallible, changeable, and often totally opposed to natural laws.

The premise here is that all those responsible for sustainability – in reality, humanity as a whole – must understand the way Nature works, and the laws that govern it. This is what great scientists are always seeking. When Einstein said that all he wanted was to understand how God thinks (all the rest being something small or trivial), it is this that he was referring to: to universal laws that could, possibly, be expressed in a single mathematical equation (which is where science is heading, toward the so-called Unified Field Theory or Theory of Everything).

It is not ethical to justify activities that result in the non-sustainability of evolution based on the local laws of specific countries, or even laws created by entities with worldwide authority. In a moment in which life on the whole planet is at stake, a foundation in laws that are universal is fundamental. And therein lies the great challenge – to continue our quest for knowledge about the whole and about the laws of Nature. And to assure that everyone who can have an impact on sustainability knows how these laws operate. While we move toward that point, we must be humble and acknowledge all that we still do not know. Then, we will tend to decide with more care and more awareness.

Principle 9: The Ethics of Life

The ethics of life is the ethics inherent in the Great Game, the Game of Life. The principle here is that all deliberations about questions of sustainability must always take into consideration the greater context and the system that the sum of all games – the economic game, the political game, the global competition game, the financial game, etc. – represents. The principle here is the extreme care that must be taken, especially taking into account the irregularities, fallacies, illusions, explicit and tacit rules of this game as compared with the Great Game of Life, the Ideal Game that is capable of creating the sustainability we all dream of. No deliberation about sustainability should be put into effect without considering the game in which the issues appear, how they will be affected (by the game), and how they will affect the dynamics of everything. And no deliberation should be conducted without also considering the other game, the one that transcends all others: the Game of Life (the one defined by universal laws).

The premise here is that the Game of Life is the one that considers life above everything – above the economic, above the political, above the financial, the commercial, etc. The premise here is that perfectly sustainable development will only be possible when life prevails over all other values created by human beings. And when we are capable of questioning the foundations of the very way of life itself, patterns of consumption, etc., that generate the present non-sustainability of our “development” of the planet. It is not ethical to participate in a game of illusions in which the economics of the short term prevails over even the total health of people and of all forms of life on the planet. The premise here is that life must be at the center of everything.

Principle 10: The Ethics of the Common Good

The ethics of the common good is the ethics of what is best for everybody, without any kind of exclusion. The principle here is the search for perfection, the search for a Possible Utopia, in the quest for sustainable development. The principle is that, in practice, we cannot accept less, otherwise there will be gaps through which sustainability itself will become unworkable. Effective implementation requires that everyone be in tune with this pattern of perfection. It is the noble purpose that seeks the best for everyone, that helps to dissolve differences in individual, sectorial, and regional interests and objectives. No deliberation about sustainability should be conducted if the greater purpose (the common good, the best for all) is not clear to everyone. This principle is essential to the concept of sustainability, which is always about the systemic whole/interconnected, and never merely about part of it.

The premise here is that sustainability assumes full cooperation and not competition of the type that prevails in society today. The only positive competition is that which we see in Nature, which is much closer to children’s games (that assume a climate of playing together), rather than war games, in which the other is seen as an enemy. The premise is also that the excess of pragmatism and cynicism that comes with competition is fatal to the generation of sustainable development.

It is not ethical to reduce or lower the level of aspiration when seeking for sustainability. This would be incongruent. In essence, sustainable development is itself the quest for perfection in society as a whole.

This is my contribution to the debates. I hope that it can, in some way, contribute to the effective realization of the world we all dream of.

Thank you. ■