

The Challenge of Sustainable Development and Prosperity

by Arthur Dahl



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THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPERITY

The concepts of sustainable development and prosperity are fundamental to business success and longevity. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of business may well be to generate prosperity within a framework of sustainable development. The question is thus how to create the conditions to achieve this purpose.

PROSPERITY

Prosperity has multiple dimensions. Increasingly, it is recognized not only to include material well-being but also social and even spiritual progress. Nor is it merely a matter of one's net worth, the size of one's house, or the kind of car one drives. It includes—or should include—environmental prosperity which we can define as keeping the environment rich and productive. Moreover, prosperity must also reflect the richness of the interactions among the members of society and the spiritual dimensions of the world they inhabit. So we must start by recognizing these broader, more extensive dimensions of prosperity and match our approach toward development to this multi-dimensional prosperity.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development remains a useful term, despite being difficult to define, let alone translate. The United Nations usually refers to two working definitions of sustainable development. One derives from the work of the Brundtland Commission. It defines sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present generation without preventing future generations from meeting their own needs. The other definition, called *Agenda 21*, was negotiated and agreed upon by most states at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Set out in 40 chapters and 120 program areas, *Agenda 21* takes the form of a plan of action for achieving sustainable development. So various are the definitions that the term can mean almost anything to anybody, to the point that some consider it in need of replacement. But what is critical about any definition of sustainable development is that it refer to prosperity as a state that can continue indefinitely and apply to all. In other words, sustainable development has dimensions both in time and in space. It covers not just some small segment of the planet's population but everyone everywhere. And it is not just for now but extends into the future.

Sustainability is very dynamic and process oriented. It does not occupy a point in time at which we suddenly attain sustainable development. Think of an airplane in flight: as long as there is enough fuel, the motors are working properly and the pilot knows the route, the flight is sustainable; but if something goes wrong with any of

those elements, the flight cannot be sustained, making the destination unreachable. Similarly, there must be resources enough to keep the economy functioning, but sustainability in society requires the transmission of experience and knowledge from generation to generation, so there is an education component. Without our knowledge, the next generation would have to start over. If that were the case, the society we had achieved would not be, in a word, sustainable.

Sustainability also contains an institutional dimension. This dimension, too, is dynamic. Our institutional heritage, whether governmental or business, must be transmitted to future generations. This is not automatic: many structures and procedures initially operate well but one can lose sight of their original purpose and, if so, they fade away or freeze into bureaucratic irrelevancy. So sustainability means bringing the time dimension into every aspect of society.

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

One way of understanding where society is going and the importance of sustainable development is to consider alternative scenarios. The United Nations Environment Program, in collaboration with various research institutes, has produced clusters of such scenarios. One of them is that of “business as usual”. This scenario assumes that we continue operating as we are and projects what the results of doing so would be fifty years later. It shows the developed world proceeding reasonably well, with the middle class broadening, incomes rising, and businesses generally profiting. Nor does the shorter-term perspective look bad. However, after fifty years, this scenario shows the world reaching significant resource limits as fossil fuels diminish relative to demand and natural resources become depleted. At that point, society reaches fundamental limits. Thereafter the outlook becomes increasingly grim as the economy struggles to deal with the effects of depleted resources all over the planet.

A second scenario, sometimes called “the fortress scenario”, looked somewhat extreme—at least until the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. This scenario portrays wealthier countries giving up on the problems of Africa, much of Latin America and Asia. Rather than dealing with them, they withdraw behind their frontiers, keeping everybody else out and trying to achieve internal sustainability. Such an approach may appeal to those who see immigration

as the source of their problems and who, therefore, seek to protect their own countries from the rest of the world. Though imaginable, is such a scenario realistic? Can countries really choose to stay behind walls, as in the Middle Ages, holed up in a castle on the hill and manning the ramparts against potential intruders, while chaos and confusion reign outside? What kind of a life might we expect under such a scenario? Clearly, not a very desirable one.

These scenarios suggest a third: a transition to a more sustainable kind of society, conceived on a global scale. Research into models supporting such a scenario demonstrate that we can, in fact, make the necessary adjustments to achieve such a society. We have sufficient resources, if we redistribute them more justly and use them more efficiently. The studies show that, far from being some absurd utopia, we can indeed make the transition to a more sustainable future, providing that we start now and make a serious effort. Even from a technical perspective, this is a real option for us.

SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

To begin turning this third option into reality, we first must rethink the concept of prosperity and put it into a systems framework. We should consider development not merely as some desirable state of material well-being, but as a series of processes for advancing society as a whole. But how do we manage these processes? A process engineer knows that producing desired outputs requires monitoring and control systems to show what is happening, and also homeostatic mechanisms to contain the process within desired limits. Sustainable development requires a kind of process engineering to ensure that we are driving society towards a more sustainable future.

We cannot isolate the material side of the development process from the social and environmental. Pollution, for example, goes everywhere and cannot be ignored. There is no way we can separate ourselves from that reality. Similarly, we cannot separate ourselves from the social dimension, as demonstrated by the September 11th attacks. No matter how hard we try to stand aside and remain aloof from the social and economic problems and crises abroad, in one way or another, they will force themselves upon us. This means that any attempt to achieve sustainable development and prosperity must be broad, all encompassing and global. There is no way to compartmentalize one part and ignore other parts. A lot of the rethinking in the Western world today seems to arise from recognition that it is no longer possible to

ignore these problems. We must try to find solutions. On a planetary level, there are no foreign problems.

From a process perspective, the system has to be considered at multiple levels. Sustainability needs to be achieved within the enterprise, within the sector, within the community, within the nation, and around the world. Systems must deal with the issues of sustainability at each of these levels. This requires designing a multi-level system of operation and creating a series of control and feedback processes and guidance mechanisms at each level.

Obviously, the process-guidance mechanisms for humans and human society are not thermometers, instruments, gauges and the like. Rather, they rest on values. Our values condition our relationships and provide the fundamental control signals driving the operating programs of human society. So if we want to modify society or adjust the control programs, we must modify the basic values. At the social level, values are like the genetic code in a biological system: the instructions are there, and they control the operating processes. In biology, genes determine which molecules operate with which kinds of structures. In society, values determine when, how and with whom human interactions occur.

Recent work in computer programming has demonstrated relevant properties in complex systems. When programs become so big and complicated that programmers can no longer keep up with them, they construct “neural” networks linking a large number of computers

with simple operating rules and procedures, and repeat selection of the best-adapted solutions. Over time, the optimal solution evolves. That is how biology works; no central planner selects which organisms should interact, or how they should evolve under changing circumstances. So central planning is not the way to go in complex systems, as the communist experience has amply demonstrated. Sustainable development is thus generally considered to have economic, environmental and social aspects, with sets of indicators reflecting the evolution within each one as society develops. Less apparent is the ethical component because sustainable development means linking its practical or material elements to human values. The act of looking at the needs of all the planet's people and considering the needs of future generations is rooted in ethics. The concept that whatever we do must be done for future generations as well as our own is an application of the principle of justice. Because sustainable development combines the ethical-spiritual dimension with the material, the European Bahá'í Business Forum has placed it among the core values underlying business responsibility.

THE ROLE OF VALUES

Any effort to improve human relationships, human structures, or human institutions must begin by addressing basic values. In a sense, the only central planner for human society is God, who throughout history has been programming humanity by means of a series of religions in how to develop our social interactions. God's work has been to get the rules right at the outset, and He did a good job with physical and biological laws. But we have yet to succeed at the human level: the laws are perfect, but our implementation of them is faulty. We have not learned to "program them" into ourselves effectively enough to make society work as God intended. That is the really great challenge we face.

Looking from this perspective at our present economic and business systems, our present rules and values are seriously dysfunctional. They are driving us in extremely unsustainable directions, environmentally and socially. They also are unethical. Our underlying values are rooted in 19th century Darwinian views of species evolving through survival of the fittest. Carried to a logical conclusion, the implications of such values are unacceptable in human terms. In purely economic terms, however, the unemployed and the impaired ought not to be helped because they burden society without contributing to production. Consider the recent example of a report submitted by a tobacco company to the Czech government that said tobacco use should be encouraged because earlier deaths would save considerable sums in

pensions and health-care spending. When this report became public, the company apologized and withdrew it, but the episode demonstrates the ethical problems underlying purely economic thought. Another example is the case of the leaked memo drafted by a World Bank official that proposed moving polluting industries from rich, developed countries to poor, developing countries where, it suggested, human life was worth less and so pollution would be less costly to the economy. The fact that the memo's author may have been motivated by a sense of satire does little to lessen the purely economic relevance of such a view.

In short, economic thought cannot ignore the ethical, moral and spiritual dimensions of the world in which it operates. And yet, our society is structured and our institutions are built to function on just such a shortsighted basis. Business corporations are not held accountable for moral values, only for profitability. Their managers are judged only by that very narrow criterion. It is little wonder that they sometimes do extremely damaging things for society as a whole.

PROBLEMS IN THE PRESENT SYSTEM

Our present society has fundamental structural and institutional problems that we must recognize and manage to resolve. We must change the basic operating principles and values of the structures of our society if we are to move in a more moral, ethical and spiritual direction. For instance, because the economic system only values what is marketed or traded, everything else is considered an externality of no importance to economic analysis. A fundamental problem with economics is that it maintains inadequate accounts. Paying attention only to what has monetary value, economic analysis misses much of what is happening in society. It is like trying to take care of an automobile only by keeping the tank filled and ignoring everything else necessary to keep it running safely. Moreover, society also follows the wrong economic guidelines. Take a measure like gross domestic product. GDP is widely equated with prosperity: higher GDP means greater prosperity. However, GDP also grows because more people are suffering from the health effects of pollution; it grows if more automobile accidents occur requiring repairs, replacements and medical treatment. So GDP is no accurate measure of prosperity and ought not to be used to measure it. The use of monetary measures is similarly inadequate. Too often people say “more money equals prosperity.” But you cannot eat money. If food runs out, money has no value at all. Neither money nor profit can measure human happiness and well-being.

Another problem is the importance that economists attach to growth. To them, growth is needed for success: a company has to grow, the economy must expand. But the planet is a limited system, and sooner or later we are going to reach its environmental limits. Economics also ignores social limits, not to mention the optimal scales of functionality. Each organism has a particular optimal size. Corporations that get too big either must break down into profit centers or go out of business. Sometimes they do, or are bought out and broken up into more manageable elements. Certain optimal scales exist for any system, but economics is not very scale-sensitive. It strives for growth regardless of its impact on the overall system.

A related problem is consumerism, the pressure, through advertising and other exhortations to go out and buy, buy, buy to keep the economy going. An American expression, “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping”, captures this misplaced emphasis. A system that pushes people to buy things they do not need, in a world of limited resources in which people are starving, is a system that has something structurally and fundamentally wrong with it.

The drive for increased productivity is another issue in which the logic of individual decisions has a perverse collective impact on society. Raising productivity is an economic imperative. A company must raise its productivity and reduce its labor costs to increase its profitability. Yet this ignores the fact that employees are also consumers. If the number of people earning

wages declines, there are that many fewer consumers to buy products and services. It is a case of sawing off the branch you are sitting on. To benefit the economy in a real sense, why not seek to make everybody a consumer by ensuring total employment. Instead, decision-making in the corporate system moves in the opposite direction. This is encouraged by another structural problem in Western economies: the privatization of employment and the socialization of unemployment. In other words, companies reduce their labor costs in the short term by transferring to the government the cost of maintaining the redundant workers. Such a short-sighted system ignores the importance of work as a contribution to society and a spiritual obligation.

Problems with globalization generate increasing controversy. Globalization has freed the movement of capital, and the World Trade Organization has a mandate to globalize the movement of goods and services. But nobody wants to talk about the third essential dimension of globalization, the free movement of people. Such free movement would be a great global equalizer, breaking down the disparities between countries rich and poor. If a country did not want the masses of the poor pouring across its borders, it would pay for them to stay at home. Since few of us like to leave home if we can avoid it, this would become a powerful force for redistributing resources more justly. It would also help to bring populations back in balance with environmental resources. Where there are more resources, people could come and develop them. Where there are not enough, people could

move away. If through climate change the grain basket of the American Middle West turned into a desert and Siberia became fertile, should we wait for several new generations of Russians to grow up to populate Siberia with farmers, or do we allow experienced American grain farmers to move there? It will be a challenge to resolve such problems of shifts in carrying capacity around the world, but they are going to become an increasing part of the dynamics in the years ahead.

Then, of course, the economic system ignores the poor. Since they are not consumers, the poor are excluded or forgotten. Their presence illustrates a series of fundamental failures in present mechanisms for redistributing wealth within society. Any developed society considers extremes of wealth and poverty to be unacceptable. The poor cannot be left to die while the rich walk over their bodies, of course, so at least some effort is made to put the poor out of sight in some way. There is, however, a greater moral principle that requires some level of wealth sharing, and taxation systems are designed to do that. Yet, it is possible to escape taxation. With globalization, wealth creation is increasingly reported not in the countries with strong tax systems, but in the Cayman Islands, Vanuatu and other so-called tax havens. Such avoidance of taxation is logical within a system in which the first priority is to maximize profit. Multi-nationals increasingly shift their real wealth creation out of places where taxation is heavy, escaping the mechanisms that allow restoration of the social balance. One of the most

fundamental crises with globalization today is the breakdown of the mechanisms for redistributing wealth.

Nor does the present economic system assign a meaningful priority to the needs of the poor. Where there is no potential income, there is no market and, therefore, no business interest. As a result, there is little incentive, in terms of the profit motive, in developing medicines to combat the diseases of the poor who cannot afford to buy them. There are many choices between elaborate technologies that can sell for a high price and those technologies that people can do for themselves without expensive inputs. Most business effort goes into products that yield profits. No mechanism encourages people to use technology they can apply themselves because there is no market for it. The profit motive, not the well-being of people or the overall benefit to humanity, pushes development towards high technology.

With respect to environmental sustainability, the economic system fails to deal effectively with most environmental problems. It works at the wrong scales in time and space. The economic system is very short term, while most environmental problems are long term, planetary, and occur on a very large scale. Businesses only deal with some small fragments of such problems. No mechanism puts together individual forms of corporate behavior to enable us to look at the larger picture. The result is a fundamental miss-match when it comes to dealing with such large-scale problems as carbon-dioxide accumulation, the ozone hole, persistent organic pollutants, soil and water management, and the like. Too

often, the economic system fails to come to grips with the essential issues because it tries to deal with them at the wrong scales in space and time.

Another area of growing concern involves intellectual property. In economic terms, we are witnessing a new “privatization” of “the commons.” Businesses are exploring ways to make money by buying (or privatizing) information (the commons) that it can then sell at a profit. Unlike most products, however, the more information is shared, the greater its value to society. Information on good soil management, for example, can be sold as a product only to farmers who can afford it, leaving other farmers to continue destructive agricultural practices. Obviously, there would be greater benefit by making such information available to all who can use it. This brings us to a point where two fundamental value systems collide.

In agriculture, two systems operate simultaneously: on one side is the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research institutions; on the other are the great multinational agribusiness firms. The research institutes created the Green Revolution over many years with funds from the Rockefeller Foundation, the World Bank and other institutional sources. The institutes maintain gene banks for various crops, sharing the genetic resources freely around the world; they breed new crops adapted to the great variety of conditions that exist in the world. As the results of the Green Revolution show, this system of sharing information works very effectively, boosting nutrition and reducing

hunger globally. Contrast that record with that of agribusiness companies that are buying up and patenting genetic resources to produce crops that will be the more profitable because the companies sell not only the seeds, but the herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers needed to coax maximum output from the seeds. They can sell the resulting “one-size-fits-all” package to farmers around the world, minimizing costs and maximizing profits. While uniform varieties can work under ideal conditions, they are vulnerable to new or more resistant diseases. One year, an epidemic suddenly swept through the corn in the American Middle West because the same hybrid seeds had been sown everywhere. This approach goes in the wrong direction. Though it may increase short-term profits for the agribusiness firms involved, it narrows the genetic base of our major food crops and, therefore, is ecologically unsustainable. These two systems operate simultaneously with two totally different approaches to intellectual property. One privatizes it in order to reap the greatest profit for the owning corporation; the other makes the information available for the good of all humanity. This results in serious conflicts in terms of moral values, ethical principles, and operating practices—conflicts that the business community needs to think hard about.

The questions posed by these problems are fundamentally ethical: How do we foster a new moral, ethical and spiritual foundation in business? How do we establish new ground rules for business to help it contribute to a more sustainable society? How can we create a broader

legal and institutional framework in which business can work to overcome the problems of fragmentation of responsibility and of inadequate or absent moral and ethical accountability? The root of the problem lies in the way in which economic institutions are structured. We need to explore how we can maintain the vitality of corporate structures and their ability to evolve quickly, but within a framework built around ethical, moral and spiritual values that will help the system work effectively for society as a whole.

NEW VALUES FOR BUSINESS

Let us examine for a moment the necessary new values and operating principles that would underlie a more sustainable society. On the individual level, they are readily apparent: if we want to improve human relationships we need more love, more altruism. We need a sense of justice, a willingness to share wealth and make sacrifices. We need a sense of solidarity with the human race, a sense of serving all humanity. We need a more spiritually oriented work ethic, a sense of moderation and contentment with fewer material goods. If we want to achieve sustainability, if we want to share resources effectively around the world and allow everybody to develop so that wealth is open to all, we must change our values with respect to material things and adopt a willingness to see wealth redistributed in order to reduce the dangerous extremes of wealth and poverty. We must become trustworthy and more respectful of creation and all that surrounds us. At the individual level, the more we can strengthen those values in each of us, the more we shall be equipped with the right kind of operating principles to build a sustainable society.

The same is true institutionally, since these same values can be applied to business. We can, at the business level, create a sense of service to society, recognize that business does not exist just to make money, but also to serve society. We can build the value of service into business. Business systems can easily adapt to a service orientation, but only if the goal broadens beyond profit seeking. If

that is done, the driving force behind business becomes much more constructive than it is now.

The principle of justice also has applications in business. These applications include sharing profits with all the corporation's workers and involving them in decision making. Justice can apply also to such prosaic things as interest rates. Islam forbade usury, and in early Christianity charging interest was prohibited. That is why Jews, not so restricted by their faith, could make the money that nobody else was allowed to make. Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, allowed a moderate level of interest, suggesting that there exists a certain level of interest that corresponds to the lender's legitimate risk, gains in productivity, creation of wealth and so forth. Interest charged above that legitimate level of risk might be hiding the exploitation of poor workers or the costs left for future generations or other parts of the world to pay. In short, a high level of interest most likely disguises some level of injustice within the business system.

Business also needs to pay more attention to the sustainable management of natural resources. These should be considered as capital accounts. As with managing any other capital account, net losses are to be avoided. Business activity should produce no net loss for any of its capital accounts, be they economic accounts, human accounts or resource accounts. In the same way, businesses should avoid any net transfer of costs, or capital losses, to future generations or other parts of the world. Each generation's accounts should ultimately balance. This, of course, requires new accounting systems to

allow us to calculate these various accounts, and that remains a big challenge.

Economic activity also must respect the limits of Earth's life-support systems and ecological processes. Because many of those processes are planetary, respecting them will require building new global institutions for managing them at that level. This institution building is another major challenge before us.

Let us consider the market mechanism as an example of how values influence the economic system. Markets are based on competition, and all too often on some form of manipulation. A used car salesman may, for example, hide the fact that a vehicle he seeks to sell at the highest possible price has been involved in an accident that produced damage not visible to the potential buyer. Moreover, in sectors in which there are few competitors, price-fixing may be arranged to increase revenues for each participant in the scheme. Absent ethical values, or effective outside regulation, markets may seem more competitive than they actually are, just as the damaged car may appear better than it really is. But markets work best if they operate on principles of truthfulness and open consultation. Market theory is based on perfect information, but available information is rarely perfect. Prices would be set more fairly, for example, if the seller openly shared the real cost of production and the buyer fairly portrayed his or her need for the product. Consultation fosters the setting of a price that fairly balances the seller's cost and the buyer's need in terms of willingness to pay. Just so, the market would work

more effectively if it were infused with a spirit of collaboration and consultation rather than, as at present, with a competitive spirit seeking to see which sides can best the others. In short, it is not so much the mechanics of the economic system that are wrong, but the values that underlie it. They need to be replaced or adjusted if we are to develop more sustainable mechanisms in society.

TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

How do we apply these values to make society more sustainable? If we are to overcome the present fragmented approach to decision-making, we need more consultative mechanisms between businesses as well as between business and government. If we are to make decisions that involve whole systems or resources, we need to devise mechanisms and processes to make possible consultation among all stakeholders. Consultation and communication offer the means of overcoming the compartmentalization of society into isolated domains, each of which seeks to maximize its own particular area without collaborating with the other domains.

We need to find ways to make decisions within a planetary perspective, since we are dealing with a global system. Planet Earth is one country and, therefore, we need to be able to integrate decision-making up and down the various component levels—international, national, regional, local. We must also redistribute responsibility among these various levels. There has been too much centralization at the level of national governments and multi-national corporations. Many systems work better when they devolve responsibilities to smaller units. This may mean investing responsibility in communities or among resource-users at the local level, or devolving it to smaller units within a business, whether as profit centers or quality-control programs. So we must rethink our institutional arrangements and devise ways of applying

the principle of what the European Union calls “subsidiarity” in redesigning the system. This applies equally within business and generally within society.

Some global structures already exist, of course, in the form of multinational businesses and such international bodies as the World Trade Organization. The WTO has teeth and can impose sanctions if necessary in resolving trade disputes between its member nations. But we lack balance globally across the different sectors: there is no WTO of the environment, for example, only a few general principles. Because we lack balance in our global institutions, we witness stresses and strains every time the WTO tries to meet.

Moreover, because there is no global system of taxation, we have no way of paying the costs of global governance. The United Nations must go begging to national governments for the money that it needs to pay for performing essential services at a global level. Every national treasury weighs national priorities higher, generally with an eye to the next election. This is no way to manage society globally. We must find better ways to deal with issues of taxation and redistribution at that level. This is a particular weakness of our present international institutions.

Businesses need fairness operating on a global basis. They have difficulty dealing with differing regulations, corrupt systems, and so forth. It is, therefore, in the interest of business to strengthen global mechanisms and establish a level playing field. To achieve that, it would be reasonable for businesses to pay taxes, assuming, of

course, that the taxes were applied fairly. As business becomes more enlightened, it will become a leading force to establish effective global institutions, since these institutions will be good for business. Governments hold back for fear of losing power and eroding national sovereignty. So leadership has to come from elsewhere. Businesses are, in many ways, well placed to lead the effort to build the structures all of us need to make this system operate more effectively on a global basis.

We also need to look at all the issues of social welfare and redistribution of wealth. New information technologies make intolerable the kinds of inequities and injustices that have survived for generations because of ignorance. When the poor can see via satellite television how the rich live (and often it is how the rich live as portrayed by Hollywood), they observe extreme differences between rich and poor. Is it any wonder, really, that people fly airplanes into buildings and blow themselves up as “martyrs” because what they witness through today’s information technology is simply no longer tolerable? In that sense, technology is driving us towards greater social justice. What is lacking are the mechanisms to implement and apply social justice on a global level.

We need, too, to find ways to balance all the accounts not only within corporations and within nations, but also globally. And these accounts, whether they be social accounts or environmental accounts, are seriously out of balance. Here we face an enormous challenge, one that we can overcome through voluntary acts of consultative will or else we will be forced to respond to the challenge

because of crises and catastrophe. At this point we seem to be more beset by crises and catastrophe than benefiting from voluntary will. But the potential is there. And business can provide the leadership needed to push society into a more constructive direction. We need to get affluent Western society to move away from ultra-materialism and excessive consumerism and, in doing so, simplify its life-style and increase its efficiency. Through greater simplicity in our lives and improved efficiency, we can maintain a similar quality of life while reducing by a factor of ten our consumption of energy and resources. Studies done in Europe show this to be technically possible. So one of the challenges for business is to find ways to raise efficiency, reduce use of materials, increase production of services, and support recycling processes. By doing so, we can achieve these technically challenging but attainable goals.

However, we must also look at another dimension, that of empowering the poor. We must learn how to involve poor people directly in their own development, without imposing on them our own view of development. We must organize the process so people can guide their own development, set their own values, and decide their own priorities for using resources. And we must build more organic societies, evolving themselves from the ground up and adapted to the wide variety of situations around the world.

One tool for accomplishing this derives from the principle of the independent investigation of truth: it is the recognition that science is for everyone. Once

we all become accustomed to thinking scientifically and in terms of process, we will understand how to monitor the environment, observe the changes taking place, and adjust our behavior accordingly. This extends the principle of subsidiarity to science, as everybody becomes a scientific manager, everybody becomes part of the new operating systems, and we become able to build a more sustainable society. This is a way, too, of combining science and religion, of combining ethical or spiritual considerations with the principles of science and technology. By doing so we can create a multi-level system in which, at each level, these processes operate together. The result will be a new kind of self-generating civilization, one that is ever-advancing, bringing prosperity to all the world's population.

The business community has a key role in helping us view life from a systems perspective, a perspective which is essential as we move towards a more sustainable society. We shall achieve that by getting the basic working rules right and then letting the system evolve. If our greatest challenge lies in the economic arena, it is because the present rules governing its operations are so at variance with society's real needs. As we build more sustainable businesses, we create more sustainable economies. And we set in motion the processes necessary to achieve a more sustainable civilization. That is our goal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author Lyon Dahl, based in Geneva, Switzerland, is a consultant to governments and international organizations on environmental assessment and monitoring, indicators of sustainability, coral reefs, biodiversity, islands, environmental education, and social and economic development. He recently retired from the United Nations Environment Programme, where he was a Deputy Assistant Executive Director, Director of the Coral Reef Unit, Deputy Director for Oceans and Coastal Areas, and Coordinator, UN System-wide Earthwatch. He holds an AB in Biological Sciences from Stanford University and a PhD in Biology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Before joining UNEP he was Regional Ecological Adviser, South Pacific Commission, New Caledonia, and organizer of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, and had been an Associate Curator in the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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