

Sustainable development as intercultural action

– a paradox of unity and uniqueness?

Miriam Sannum

Here are some short and personal reflections upon sustainable development, intercultural and science. To me there are many reasons to connect sustainability and intercultural issues. One of the most obvious is that if we (in the western part of the world) had all the answers – we would have sustainable development by now! Second; even if we manage to create a sustainable enclave here, there would not be a sustainable development on earth! In order to generate sustainability, we have to get wiser together, we have to relearn and create in between existing cultures (ways of being, thinking and doing).

What is intercultural?

To me intercultural has to do with movement and action. It is not about you, it is not about me; it is about us creating something genuinely new together – a new reality. We may tell each other stories of our lives and may catch a glimpse of another culture, other perspectives. But we can also invite each other to discover a shared ground and a piece of shared consciousness.

When we go beyond our own culture, beyond the intercultural, we can meet in a point where everything is one. When a person opens up to really listen to another person, without judging or measuring – just being there as full presence and emptiness – it is the most beautiful moment of existential unity. In that moment we share in the deepest existential way the paradox of unity and uniqueness. We are revealing and embracing the differences and in the same moment they fade away. To me this moment is the point that can generate intercultural actions. In this state there is no top–down, no bottom–up – only sharing. One way of sharing is to find and describe a shared vision. Intercultural action is to make that shared vision come true (break through).

To know anything about intercultural, we need to go into the uncertain inter-space where everything is open and possible, and visions may emerge. Love and humour help give the courage to go there. None of these qualities are known as academic though! It is very hard to enter uncertainty with an open heart in an environment that is over- critical. It is much safer to stay in one's own culture and formulate empty shells of academic words.

I would not say that a “spirit–to–spirit” meeting is intercultural. Meeting another spirit is not an exotic exchange, nor a creative process; to me it is about remembering: who you are, why you are here, what you should do, and that we are all one.

What has this got to do with sustainable development?

That remembering is an ontological experience with dramatic consequences. Damage to nature or other people are now damage to you, and you can actually feel the pain and grief of unsustainability within your body. So, envisioning a future from this remembered place carries its own self sustaining qualities.

At the same time, there is an unbelievable richness in the insight that every single person is unique, a “never before and never again” combination of biology, culture, family, gender, spirit etc. When we learn to meet beyond that, in unity, the differences become a well of possibilities; uncountable possibilities to create sustainability.

When I started to work as a biologist many years ago, I thought I had to teach people what to do and think. At that time some scenarios were popular; in a way to frighten people to change their lives. Quite soon I understood that this was not good pedagogy. So I became interested in visions and ways to empower each other to act in ways consistent with our insights.

During my years of working with envisioning processes I have experienced astonishing wisdom among common people. And most interesting is that we seem to be very altruistic by nature; we are longing to share and to contribute to the common good! To me, all these visions say something about sustainability, about social responsibility, fair trade and beauty. When we start to enact our visions and transform society, then we are in an intercultural process and co-creators of sustainable development. In fact I believe *that is a sustainable development!*

Maybe we should talk about sustainable transformation instead. Development and improvement tend so stay within a culture, creating more of the same.

What has science to do with intercultural and sustainability?

A scientific perspective has its own qualities and can be very helpful to analyse, draw conclusions, criticize, invent new solutions, formulate theories and useful practical advice. Scientific knowledge may help us to find out how to design a process, how to ask powerful questions, how we can learn to cooperate, and something about intercultural pedagogy. But it will never give us intercultural actions nor sustainability.

Thinking of sustainable development as intercultural action suggests that sustainable innovations are born ‘in between’. That is also relevant as an intercultural action within myself; between the outer, socially constructed, maybe scientific me and my inner self. In the ongoing dialogue in the inter-space between this outer me and inner self I define my actions, my purposes and my identity. Maybe life is a journey in to the centre point, finally becoming pure “spirit”...

So I think that some crucial challenges for sustainability, relevant to universities are:

- How can society be more open to (and critical to) scientific knowledge as to other cultures?
- How can scientists (teachers and students) be more open and humble to inner wisdom and other ways of thinking and acting?
- How can we improve scientific quality by taking into account the paradox of personal uniqueness and shared unity?
- How can universities become more of an arena for intercultural action in order to contribute to sustainability?

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Miriam Sannum