

Sustainable development as a multilateral and cultural issue

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Your Majesty,

Your Royal Highnesses,

Ladies and gentlemen

Few authors have written more beautifully about humanity and the universe than the Argentinean poet and novelist Jorge Luis Borges. Borges portrays human existence as man dwelling in a library, a garden, or a palace - all of them of undefined and perhaps of infinite dimensions. Everything man would like to know is contained within these spaces. In *La Biblioteca de Babel*¹, for example, a labyrinth of magical geometry, the hero is searching for a book, in the catalogue of catalogues of all books already written and all those that will be written, in languages still unknown. Human beings, in other words, oscillate between multitude and emptiness, hope and despair, between knowing and not knowing. And the human experience itself is limited. As Borges says in *The Book of Sand*, '**a nadie le esta dado de recorrer mas que una parte infinitesimal ...**', it is granted to no one to traverse more than an infinitesimal part² of this universe. No one has the total overview. These are eloquent metaphors for the search we are undertaking towards a more sustainable world. This has to be a collective endeavour, because none of us – no individual, and no single country – has a solution for what is the greatest challenge confronting mankind: how to live on this planet without destroying the chances of the next generations to satisfy their needs and live peacefully³. And this has indeed to be a search based on knowledge: on cultural traditions, the knowledge of what already exists, as well as on science, the openness towards new ideas, or knowledge of what will exist. I believe Prince Claus has formulated comparable thoughts on what we should aim for, when he wrote: 'awareness of one's own cultural identity and past is a fundamental condition for sustainable development'⁴. The many publications written about sustainability would fill numerous, perhaps innumerable galleries in the labyrinth of Borges's library. Sustainability, with its closely linked challenges of security, economic growth and poverty eradication, has not been absent from the political agenda after the publication of the Brundtland report in 1987. It was the centre piece of many major political gatherings from the Earth Summit in 1992 to today. This has resulted in broad agreement on overall principles, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) up to the recent G8 agreements on climate and energy. As a world we are now committed to cut green house gas emissions, to save water and biodiversity, to reduce poverty and to increase education. Nevertheless, what sustainability really is remains elusive. There seems to be no one who has the final answer as to how to deal with it: it is as if we are still searching for the one mysterious book with all the solutions, to use Borges's image again.

Can we reach sustainability?

The simple view is that sustainability starts at home, in the developed countries at least, with personal decisions to use public transport rather than cars, to acquire fewer and more energy-saving appliances or to buy locally produced food. We see some signs of increasing awareness and a modest willingness to change, but this is true for only a fraction of the one billion people living in the OECD

countries, who are the greatest polluters. In any case, such modest changes in consumer behaviour are far from sufficient. What matters in assessing sustainability is the consumption pattern as a whole rather than the product. The temptations for individuals **not** to act in an environmentally friendly way are great, and many people remain confused. Why change behaviour if I do not see an immediate benefit, for example in my own energy bill? Often, there is no immediate benefit or only an additional burden: more taxes in order to protect nature, more regulations for appliances. And then there is the real problem of solidarity: why would I try to save water if my neighbour does not? Governments, through regulation and taxation and their own purchase behaviour, can facilitate this transition but not substitute for the individual consumer. On the other hand, the private sector has massively embraced the concept of sustainability, and technological solutions, especially in the field of energy and material recycling, advance rapidly. But certification for what can be considered sustainable technology is still in its infancy. While we may be mildly optimistic about the OECD, the situation is difficult in the rapidly modernising economies where consumer aspirations trigger an enormous growth in production, with major environmental effects. With overall demand for energy rising by 60% by 2030, these industrialising countries will be responsible for three quarters of the increase. The enormous and needed growth to overcome poverty is not accompanied by adequate legal and technological measures to protect the environment. There is little moral ground for the West to counter the valid aspirations of newly industrialised countries. On the contrary, development assistance ought to focus on the transition towards a more sustainable economy. The problem is that by dealing with sustainable development in a sectoral and piecemeal fashion - adjusting consumer behaviour, putting caps on emissions, increasing energy and resource use efficiency - we are defeated by our own successes. For example, we are able to reduce petrol use per kilometre travelled, but we produce heavier cars, buy more of them and travel further. The net result is that our emissions do not decrease, not here in the western world, nor in the emerging economies. Our collective aspirations are becoming a threat to sustainability. It seems that we lack the correct social and mental attitudes to **save** resources rather than waste them. So can we do more to tackle the problem of sustainability?

A collective cultural shift

Today's situation is unique. Never before has mankind as a whole been as wealthy as today. Areas of poverty and hunger still exist, but more people are lifted out of poverty every year through economic growth. Pockets of permanent hunger are mainly a function of civil unrest and ecologically adverse conditions. Unless a disaster occurs, the world will continue to become richer and consume more. Sustainability requires a cultural shift, a shift in values and norms that puts to the fore again the common good, the benefit of all, rather than the profit of the individual. This is far from easy. Throughout 150,000 years of human history, our basic reactions have been determined by the need to cope with scarcity. If an opportunity to acquire food or goods presents itself, we will accumulate wealth, because our visceral reaction is to survive by trying to control more resources. Desiring affluence is logical in the context of a life conditioned by natural disasters, physical suffering and premature death. Only the last few generations of human beings are getting used to a life where poverty is **not** common to all. Our present surplus of goods is so very recent, that we have not learnt to cope with it. We are collectively unable to say no – to food, to a car, to travel. It explains why, even in countries where the average level of income is still low, the emerging middle classes display consumption patterns that even surpass those of some of the rich countries. Obesity in Chinese children is growing by 8% a year. We need to face up to the fact that our values are not equipped to deal with affluence. Indeed, sustainability is a matter of culture, but not in the simple sense that

traditional values do not necessarily guarantee environmentally sound behaviour. There is a tendency to idealise groups living close to nature in the tropical forest or the desert, as being somehow more in harmony with their environments. Unfortunately, there is little indication that this is truly the case, and there are several examples to the contrary. But even where traditional cultures contain elements of respect for nature and the past, we cannot turn back to a situation of low population densities and primitive technology. With secularisation, the social controls that limited the greed of the individual have not been replaced by a new moral authority. We must therefore learn how to adapt to an unprecedented situation of plenty and choice, of technological options and widespread mobility, even if scarcity still exists in some parts of the world. We must invent a new culture, a new morality that reflects our interconnectedness and our joint responsibility for our common future. Some degree of frugality and modesty must replace conspicuous consumption, the desire for affluence and personal greed.

The UN, transboundary problems and equity

After years of euphoria about the idea of sustainability, some disillusion now seems to set in. Cultural change is exceedingly difficult, and may take too long, technological solutions may become available, but are they affordable? Above all, sustainable development deals with equity – between countries, between individuals and between generations.

What makes sustainability so difficult is the concept itself. Sustainable development is more than the sum of individual consumer decisions and also more than the sum of actions by single governments.

It cuts across boundaries, across sectors and across all levels. Sustainability is not an absolute, let alone a fixed condition, but a goal based on complex criteria that evolve over time. Sustainable development is therefore subject to negotiations and trade-offs between divergent objectives such as individual mobility and CO₂ emissions, between preserving landscapes and urban and agricultural development, or between job creation, cheap manufactured products and air pollution, or ultimately between the weak and the strong segments of humanity, between current and future generations. These trade-offs mean substituting one choice for another, hopefully less damaging option.

Notwithstanding much wishful thinking, there are rarely perfect win-win situations. They are always complex, because they weigh unequal values often in the realm of equity: for example, my choice to buy locally produced tomatoes may imply a setback in income for farmers in the Maghreb. There are also no easy options: reducing CO₂ emissions through limiting fossil fuels may have other negative side effects, whether in terms of security (in the case of nuclear), or ecological (in the case of bio-diesel). One country's gain can mean another country's loss. And the choices of one country may have an impact on other countries and vice versa. There is little point in trying to cut Dutch CO₂ emissions if this is not part of an international effort, while the decision to build nuclear plants in Europe would potentially affect all its citizens. Sustainability is therefore a transboundary and multilateral issue, even if not all environmental problems are global in nature (water, for example, is basically a regional or local problem). Many human actions at local level have global effects (in particular CO₂ emissions) and require global and coordinated solutions. Setting standards and defining policies require negotiations between states. This also avoids the serious risk of 'free riders', of countries who want to benefit from the sacrifices or trade-offs of others without doing the same. As a result of these complexities, the inclusion of sustainability has dramatically enlarged the international diplomatic agenda. But success has been painful and slow. We lack the adequate multilateral instruments and mechanisms to deal with sustainable development. To put it simply: we have a worldwide problem but no world-level decision-making body. Borges would say that we lack the central librarian and have only been reading separate volumes from the lower shelves of the library.

There is, of course, one worldwide multilateral body that could carry forward the challenge of sustainability: the United Nations. We now have a window of opportunities because two developments coincide. Firstly, there is the widespread, even if sometimes vague, consensus on sustainable development, and secondly there is overall agreement among member countries that the complexities of new tasks in a post-cold-war world require a massive reform of the UN. Reform efforts are fraught with difficulties and have focused on changes in New York: the membership of the Security Council and the streamlining of the Secretariat. This approach is far too narrow. Most people ignore that the UN also consists of numerous specialised agencies and programmes that are as much in need of reform as the Secretariat. They must change for many reasons, because their bureaucracies have become top heavy, but especially because the standard response to the expansion of tasks in the UN has been to establish new entities, rather than adjusting existing mandates, such as the special programmes for HIV/AIDS, population, environment, habitat. The results have been overlapping mandates, expanding transaction costs and competition for scarce funds. But more importantly, the new tasks ensuing from the Millennium Development Goals cannot be dealt with adequately without a much closer synergy between the technical agencies - for which they are not equipped and which they even resist. The existing cross-cutting programmes between agencies are often unmanageable. UN Water is a case in point, in which well over twenty UN agencies are supposed to collaborate. Not much has changed since the creation of the specialised agencies sixty years ago, when the need for a sectoral approach to agriculture, health and education was the standard. This fragmentation in response to the MDGs has been possible because the UN agencies and programmes are de facto autonomous bodies with their own constitution, constituencies and budget. Given the lack of national coordination, member country delegations are often totally unaware of what their colleagues are voting for in various agencies.

No wonder that the enlargement of the diplomatic agenda to include sustainability has not led to a consolidation in the technical part of the UN. So could we redesign a United Nations system that can tackle the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainability? And if so, how do we go about it? Nobody seems to give much thought to this, yet I believe it to be the great institutional challenge for the future. It requires a profound rethinking of the UN agencies as well as the Bretton Woods (IMF, WB) institutions. As a minimum, we need to review and integrate governance structures and mandates to overcome the current fragmentation and competition; to rethink economic growth to incorporate sustainability dimensions that are difficult to translate in market terms; to attribute a greater role to science in preparing and monitoring policies, and, last but not least, to integrate systematically the voices of civil society. The UN is the only guarantee that sustainability will not come at the expense of equity.

I have argued that sustainability demands that we learn how to deal with affluence. This requires new cultural values shared across boundaries of countries, class and religion to take collective responsibility for others, elsewhere and in the future. Every child should learn how to weigh his or her individual decisions in the light of the burden we put on the earth and its future generations. I have also demonstrated that sustainable development truly is a multilateral issue concerning all countries in the world. We need a renewed United Nations to cope with the new challenges ahead of us.

We are groping indeed to find our way in a world of undefined and perhaps of infinite dimensions. In the view of Jorge Luis Borges, everything man would need to know is contained within this world. I believe we can take great courage from this: our unlimited capacity to innovate and invent will prepare us to face the future if we are willing to think of the common good. The books in the library of Babel – our collective knowledge - belong to us all and will be written by us all. They are our only sustainable resource. True to the statement by Prince Claus about culture and sustainability and in the words of Jorge Luis Borges: **Ya somos el pasado que seremos, we are the past that we will be.**⁵

1 Ficciones, Emecé editores/Alianza, Buenos Aires, pp 89

2 El Palacio, in El Oro de los Tigres; In El librale arena/The Book of Sand, Penguin/Emecé bilingual Edition, 1957, pp 128.

3 The definition of sustainability used here roughly follows the Brundtland Report, Our common future, Cambridge University Press, 1987

4 Excerpt of the Prince's acceptance speech upon receiving an honorary fellowship, proposition 3, Institute of Social Studies 1988.

5 Elogia de un parque, Obra poetica. Emecé editores, Buenos Aires, pp 662