

The Sustainability and Spirituality Nexus

A reflection

“The climate crisis is not a political issue, it is a moral and spiritual challenge to all of humanity.”

Al Gore (2007)

Sustainability is often thought of as an effort to fix the world “out there.” This perspective externalizes the current global problems facing both humanity and the wider biotic community, as well as potential solutions and trade-offs. We see this reflected in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* with the interlinked *17 Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), all created with the aim of “peace and prosperity for people and the planet.”

According to the *Global Sustainability Development Report 2024*, however, only 17% of the SDGs are currently on track. The lack of progress is a reflection of societal priorities, mainstreamed values and dominant attitudes. While the necessary steps to achieve the SDGs are likely known, it appears unlikely that these steps will be taken in the near future. Despite better knowledge, both individuals and societies often appear unwilling to embark on the transformational journey of living within planetary boundaries and in peaceful coexistence with the more-than-human world with whom we share the earth. A conversation is needed on how to translate conscience into action. For this conversation to be effective, it must include consideration of values, principles, cultural understandings, worldviews, and spirituality.

Spirituality is not easily defined or embraced. While it is sometimes treated as synonymous with religion, it is a much broader concept, encompassing in effect whatever deeply touches the core of human experience and its connection to a wider reality. Although many rightly view spirituality as a deeply personal matter, it is also a social phenomenon, one which is a key aspect of how human beings form and sustain relationships. Its repertoire of values, emotions, and practices, deeply defines how human beings interact, from personal through community relationships, and institutional interactions, as well as with the world as a whole.

For our group,¹ spirituality means recognizing, respecting, and practising this fundamental fact of interconnection and interdependence of all life. In simple words it is about reconnecting to ourselves, other humans, and the more-than-human world. It is about the capacity to listen deeply. That may include inner listening – what some call self-awareness – as well as intuition and the capacity to listen to all life all around us. It calls us to recognize that there is divinity in everything and live in reciprocity. Cultivating spirituality may help to see the inter-relationship of humans with the wider biotic and cosmic communities. It may also be an opportunity to overcome the divide of religious tensions in the world as this kind of spirituality allows for a broader understanding.

¹ This reflection was curated by a group of academics from the Greater Toronto Area (Canada), sharing a concern for sustainability and well-being, to inform the SDG deliberations including the Pact for the Future following an in-depth dialogue on the understanding of spirituality within the global efforts towards a sustainable future.

While perception may vary, spiritual dimensions are an important element of learning for a sustainable future, contributing to well-being and happiness. “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD), as addressed in SDG 4.7 and acknowledged by the UN General Assembly on four occasions as a key enabler of all SDGs, offers an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be citizens of the earth and adopt a culture of peace. Emphasising this importance, we advocate to make spirituality explicit in future action plans. Incorporating notions of spirituality in the global dialogue on our common future, particularly at a policy level, can facilitate engagement that will need to include Indigenous and faith-based communities around the world. World views critical of mainstream formulations of sustainability and the promotion of development should also be considered, giving way to the potential for emerging concepts of flourishing and regeneration and emphasizing balance.

Many of us wish to leave behind the unsustainable ways of life, yet have been unwilling or unable to do so. By addressing and further cultivating a sense of spiritual connection, we are inviting in joy, awe, wonder, and, thus, energised, inspired, sustained and responsible action towards a better future for all as aimed for in the SDGs.

References

- Gore, A. (2007). Al Gore wins Nobel peace prize. The Guardian. 12 October 2007.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2020). Education for Sustainable Development. A Roadmap. UNESCO.
- United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- United Nations. (2024). Global Sustainability Development Report. UN DESA & UN Statistical System.

Contributors

Charles Hopkins, Chairholder, UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Education towards Sustainability, York University (unescochair@edu.yorku.ca)

Shashi Kant, Professor, Institute for Management & Innovation, University of Toronto Mississauga (shashi.kant@utoronto.ca)

Katrin Kohl, Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Reorienting Education towards Sustainability, York University (unescochair@edu.yorku.ca)

Blake Poland, Associate Professor, Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto (blake.poland@utoronto.ca)

Stephen Bede Scharper, Associate Professor, School of the Environment and Department of Anthropology (UTM), University of Toronto (stephen.scharper@utoronto.ca)

Halyna Zalucky, Coach and Professor, Seneca Polytechnic (reearththingcoaching@gmail.com)