

# What kind of sustainable development do we need?

## ¿Qué tipo de desarrollo sostenible necesitamos?

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### Abstract

Today, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the main framework of reference when addressing sustainability and human development. Unfortunately, there are several aspects and issues that the SDGs have ignored or underestimated and can become serious obstacles to their success. Among them, the ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of human life seem to have faded into oblivion. Without these dimensions, the SDGs may become a kind of well-intended but blind problem-solving strategy that ignores the reasons of the crisis it wants to redress. This absence is apparent when the vocabulary used by the SDGs comes under scrutiny and is still more evident when it is compared with the language used in other well-known international declarations on the same subject. Bringing this shortcoming to light opens the possibility for the SDGs to review the strategies with which they could be more effective when pursuing their purposes in the coming years.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, Agenda 2030, human development, global crisis, well-being.

### Resumen

Hoy, los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) constituyen el marco de referencia principal a la hora de abordar la sostenibilidad y el desarrollo humano. Desafortunadamente, existen varios aspectos y cuestiones que se han ignorado en los ODS, o bien subestimado, que pueden convertirse en serios obstáculos para su éxito. Entre ellos, las dimensiones éticas, culturales y espirituales de la vida humana parecen haberse desvanecido en el olvido. Sin estas dimensiones, los ODS pueden convertirse en una especie de estrategia de resolución de problemas bien intencionada, mas ciega, en la que se ignoran las razones de la crisis que se desea corregir. Dicha ausencia es clara cuando se examina el vocabulario utilizado en los ODS y resulta más evidente cuando se compara con el lenguaje empleado en otras conocidas declaraciones internacionales sobre el mismo tema. Sacar a la luz esta carencia abre la posibilidad de que los ODS revisen las estrategias con las que podrían ser más efectivos a la hora de perseguir sus propósitos en los próximos años.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo sostenible, Agenda 2030, desarrollo humano, crisis global, bienestar.

Unless we are able to translate our words into a language that can reach the minds and hearts of people young and old, we shall not be able to undertake the extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development.

Gro Harlem Brundtland  
Oslo, March 20, 1987

## 1 Introduction

A point has been reached in history when we must shape our actions throughout the world with a more prudent care for their environmental consequences. Through ignorance or indifference, we can do massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment on which our life and well-being depend. Conversely, through fuller knowledge and wiser action, we can achieve for ourselves and our posterity a better life in an environment more in keeping with human needs and hopes (UNCHE 1972, p. 3).

Statements like that are said and published very frequently these days: they point to human responsibility for the current state of life on our planet. Nevertheless, they are not current manifestos; these words were written fifty years ago, namely at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> point in the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in June 1972.

Since that year, many international conferences on environment and sustainable development have been celebrated around the world, quite often promoted or organized by the United Nations (UN) (Rio de Janeiro 1992, New York 2000, Johannesburg 2002, Rio de Janeiro 2012, New York 2015, Stockholm 2022), together with the signature of a variety of international protocols and agreements (Montreal 1987, Oslo 1994, Kyoto 1997, Gothenburg 1999, Cartagena 2000, Nagoya 2010 and Paris 2016, among them), and the approval of several important reviews and programmes, like the Brundtland Report (BR) (1987) and the Agenda 2030 (2015). Taken all in all, thousands of pages have been elaborated, discussed, and finally approved by a significant part of the UN state members (Borowy 2017). But even so the result is that in many aspects both our present and our future seem dimmer today than they did in Stockholm during the first United Nations Conference of the Human Environment (UNCHE).

At this point, our research question focuses on investigating whether this situation is due to the progressive oblivion or exclusion of some priorities, issues and values related to man, which are specified and developed in sections 2, 3 and 4. To this end, we will base our argumentation on the conception of human beings as «[...] both a creature and moulder of his environment, which gives him physical sustenance and affords him the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth [...]», according to the first dignified declaration in UNCHE (1972, p. 3). Following this

conception, we will focus on a critical revision of the UN Resolution A/70/L.1, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015), for being the main current international commitment to sustainable development. In addition, the encyclical *Laudato si'* (LS) is also addressed, since it confirms some of the outlooks present in both the Earth Charter (EC) and the BR, and stresses other issues also ignored in the Agenda.

These documents show that the moral, social and spiritual dimensions of human beings are underestimated, or go unnoticed, and are replaced by another set of concepts, issues, and values where the «creature» is often neglected, and «growth» in the cultivation of the highest human beings' dimensions is replaced by a fight for a limitless increasing of power, control, exploitation, and economic benefit for a few (Dhiman 2016, Elhacham *et al.* 2020, Greene 2013, Kapur 2015, Kopnina 2016, Piketty 2014, Stiglitz 2015, UN 1974). This trend becomes clear when the official declarations of the United Nations are contrasted with other documents that address sustainable development from a more holistic understanding of the human being. A similar comparison, addressing the role of normativity in sustainable discourses, has been elaborated by Schmiege *et al.* (2018). Stokstad (2015) summarizes a scientific review of the targets established by this Agenda.

In what follows, Section 2 introduces the set of documents that will be considered throughout the paper. Also, it presents a selection of keywords used to illuminate the issues to be analysed and some preliminary relevant contrasts when comparing their frequency in the set of documents. Section 3 develops a closer comparison between the EC and the 2030 Agenda; its goal is to identify some of the main points that are absent or underrepresented in the Agenda. In Section 4, we contrast the encyclical LS with both the Agenda and the BR. Section 5 complements and stresses the results obtained in the previous sections, completing the list of significant divergences, and showing what other aspects of our human nature, as individuals and as societies, we could consider when establishing the desirable characteristics of a more humane sustainable development. The article ends with a Conclusions section.

## 2 Words that matter

Counting the frequency of words in a text is an important resource in social science research because it can provide relevant information about the vocabulary used. Thus, the comparison in relative or absolute frequencies makes possible to identify keywords, which indicate the main topics treated or ignored, as well as the approach used (Fife 2020, Weber 1990). Let us begin by performing a vocabulary search of a set of keywords in a set of five declarations

and reports that have been published by different committees, institutions, and international meetings during the last five decades. After a preliminary consultation to the UNESCO Thesaurus, it was obvious that a small part of the keywords was pertinent enough to appear in the list —for example, «production», «technology», «responsibility» or «needs»—, while the rest of the keywords were obtained after examining the five documents. In both cases, their frequency in the documents was noted down. The results are summarized in Table 1, where the list of 39 chosen words is divided into two main sets S1, S2, being the first one related to economic and technical issues (5 words, highlighted in orange), and the second one related to cultural, moral, aesthetical, and spiritual attitudes and values (34 words, highlighted in grey). The nine more frequent words in each document appear highlighted in blue, except for LS because «needs» and «common good» appear the same number of times (32), and Stockholm Declaration where five words appear the same number of times (2) after the five words best ranked (for these two documents, 10 words are highlighted in blue).

S1	1972 STO DEC	1987 BRU REP	2000 EAR CHA	2015 LAU SI	2015 AGE 2030
S2					
Approximated number of words	2,200	146,780	2,625	41,555	16,250
technology/-gies	5	468	2	39	46
science/-es	4	62	2	15	16
Production	1	192	3	35	14
economic growth	0	42	0	5	13
GDP/GNI	0	35	0	0	12
well-being	3	16	5	1	5
Prosperity	0	4	0	1	5
tax/-xes	0	31	0	0	1
quality of life	2	8	1	15	1
interdependent/-nce	0	23	4	3	1
Distribution	0	38	1	5	0
common good	1	1	2	32	0
ecology/-gical/-gically	2	139	10	80	0
ecosystem/-ms	2	84	2	23	12
inequality/-ties	0	12	0	6	9
responsibility/-ties	5	66	7	37	10
fair/-rer	0	6	0	1	2
Justice	0	7	5	25	5
Needs	2	118	3	32	12
Limits	1	23	0	14	0
Finite	0	9	2	2	0
imperative/-ves	1	24	2	3	0
duty/-ties	1	5	1	10	0
ethic/-cs/-cal	0	7	3	26	1

S1	1972	1987	2000	2015	2015
S2	STO DEC	BRU REP	EAR CHA	LAU SI	AGE 2030
Approximated number of words	2,200	146,780	2,625	41,555	16,250
Moral	1	7	1	9	0
Values	2	16	7	14	3
relationship/-ps	0	18	1	60	0
participate/-tion	0	48	4	5	11
Care	1	23	6	34	7
Spiritual	1	8	6	13	0
joy/-yful	0	1	1	8	0
Love	0	2	1	61	0
hope/-es	1	22	1	13	0
Reverence	0	0	2	3	0
harmony/-nize	1	14	1	13	3
beauty/-tiful	0	4	2	42	0
Arts	0	0	2	0	0
Humanities	0	1	1	0	0
wise/-er/-ely/-sdom	3	5	2	12	0

**Table 1**

Absolute frequency of several selected concepts extracted from the five analysed documents: Stockholm Declaration (STO DEC), Brundtland Report (BRU REP), Earth Charter (EAR CHA), Laudato si' (LAU SI) and Agenda 2030 (AGE 2030).

Next, we briefly present the five documents analysed, namely Stockholm Declaration (1972), BR (1987), EC (2000), LS (2015) and Agenda 2030 (2015).

#### *Stockholm Declaration*

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was the first world conference focusing on the environment as a major issue. A series of principles and resolutions on the management of the environment were adopted, including the Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan for the Human Environment (Sohn 1973, Brisman 2011). The declaration consisted of 26 principles concerning the relationship between industrialized and developing countries, as well as other issues related to economic growth, pollution of the air, water, oceans, and people's well-being. As a result of the conference, the United Nations Environment Programme was created.

#### *Brundtland Report (WCED 1987)*

The BR, officially known as Our Common Future, was a document released in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, formerly a sub-organization of the United Nations known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (Keeble 1988, Jarvie 2016). Chaired by the former Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the document introduced the concept of «sustainable development» for the first time, and explored the causes of environmental degradation, the relationships between social equity, economic growth, and environmental problems, and addressed some developing policies.

### *Earth Charter (EC 2000)*

In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development issued a call to create a «Universal Declaration on Environmental Protections and Sustainable Development». This charter had to set the fundamental principles for the transition to sustainable development. The drafting process required three years and involved hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals from all over the world, the final text was approved in March of 2000. The document contains 16 principles to foster a more just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, covering four main pillars: respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, nonviolence, and peace.

### *Laudato si' (LS 2015)*

Published in 2015, LS (Praise Be to You), with the subtitle *On Care for Our Common Home*, is the second encyclical of Pope Francis, which calls for a quick and united global action as a warning to the ferocious consumerism and irresponsible development, environmental degradation, and global warming. The text describes an unprecedented destruction of the world's ecosystems for economic benefits, an excessive faith in technology, and short-sighted politics. It focuses on several issues, including biodiversity, urban planning, and agricultural economics, among others (Annett *et al.* 2017).

### *Agenda 2030*

The 2015 UN resolution *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (also known as Agenda 2030) was approved by unanimity of the state members and is the current global reference guide for sustainable development. It is a fifteen-year ambitious programme that establishes a collection of 17 SDGs designed to achieve a «better and more sustainable» future for all. Each goal has an average of 10 specific targets, to be reached by 2030, and each target has a particular set of indicators used to measure its achievement.

Now, several results in Table 1 are especially significant for our purpose:

- The most recent document analysed, the Agenda 2030, lacks the main terms related to ethical, environmental, social, and cultural values, with a relevant absence of a moral context. The 12 words, «distribution», «ecology», «limits», «interdependence», «imperative», «ethics», «moral», «relationships», «common good», «beauty», «spiritual», and «wisdom», are absent (eight words), or appear just once (four words), while more measurable economic issues such as «technology», «science», «production», «economic growth»,

and «gross domestic product» (GDP), all stand out in the top of the frequency figures.

- The BR also highlights the same economic terms. However, issues like «ecology», «needs» and «participation», or values like «responsibility» and «care» are also placed as some of the most frequent terms. On the other hand, the concepts of «economic growth» and «GDP» are absent or underrepresented in the Stockholm Declaration, the EC and the LS encyclic.
- Taken together, the words «arts» and «humanities» appear just four times on the full set of documents, while the added frequencies of «science» and «technology» exceeds one thousand (1,155).
- As regards the Agenda 2030, «technology» is by far the most repeated word (46 times) in the set of keywords.
- «Wise/-er/-ely» or «wisdom» are present in all the documents but Agenda 2030.
- Overall, the term «frequency table» could be split into two different blocks of columns: on the one hand, the BR and the Agenda 2030 put more emphasis on economic issues; on the other hand, the Stockholm Declaration, the EC, and the LS encyclic are more focused on aesthetical, ethical, and spiritual values. From this observation, it may be said that the EC and the LS are more faithful to the concerns of the Stockholm Declaration.
- A remarkable contrast is evident between the EC and the Agenda 2030: the first document has all its nine higher figures in words belonging to set S2, while the second document has five of its nine higher figures in words belonging to set S1. This fact will be used in the next section to describe some implications and effects derived from the disparity of concerns and outlook between both discourses when considering the set S2.

### 3 Earth Charter and Brundtland Report compared with Agenda 2030

A previous remark to bear in mind throughout the comparison: the size of the documents compared is considerably different, and this factor is important when looking for words and counting them. Agenda 2030 (A2030) has a total number of words six times higher than the corresponding number in EC and nine times lower than the corresponding number in BR. Thus, the relative frequency of a word may be much more significant than its absolute frequency; for instance, the word «care» appears six times in EC and seven in

A2030, while its relative frequency in EC (0.002284) is five times higher than in A2030 (0.000430).

Now, the contrast between EC and A2030 is quite strong, and it will be pointed out from three fundamental points of view, namely, ecosystem, ethics, and spirit. They allow to classify and emphasize this divergence in relation to certain keywords that appear as the most prominent in the table. In some cases, these differences also appear in BR, as will be seen below.

### 3.1. Ecosystem

«Interdependent» and «interdependence» are central concepts in EC and, of course, unavoidable for ecology; for instance, we read: «[...] we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life [...]» (EC 2000, p. 1), «recognize that all beings are interdependent [...]» (EC 2000, p. 2) and «it requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility» (EC 2000, p. 4). Interdependence is both a reality on the planet and a necessity for a better future; BR acknowledges its relevance when it uses 23 times «interdependence/-nt». Interdependence allows us the recognition of our common nature and basic needs, and how they can be met through close collaboration. Surprisingly, «interdependence» does not appear in A2030, while «interdependent» appears just 11. At first, it also seems strange that while «ecology/-gical» appear 10 times in EC, they are absent in A2030. This can be partially explained because A2030 has chosen to use the word «ecosystem/-ms», even though this word has a more restricted meaning.

Another chief word in the current sustainable development discourse is «limits» (Holden *et al.* 2018), often applied to natural resources or to the ecosystem's thresholds that it is wise not to exceed. This idea seems to be absent in A2030: it does not appear in its «Preamble»; nor does the document contain this word neither the words «finite», «surpass» or «exceed», which may take a similar meaning. Certainly, the word «scarcity» appears four times in it, but always linked to the disposal of fresh water. On the contrary, «limits» appear in all the documents but EC (significantly, 23 times in BR). Nevertheless, this concept is not forgotten in EC; for instance, it is recognized that «the global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples» (EC 2000, p. 1), and «adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world» (EC 2000, p. 3).

### 3.2. Ethics

The word «responsibility/-ties» appears 10 times in A2030. There, it probably is the most frequent concept related to the field of ethics. Other keywords commonly present in this discipline are absent or

used on very few occasions; for instance, «values» (3), «ethic/-cs/-cal» (1), «moral» (0), «duty/-ties» (0), «imperative» (0), or «relationships» (0). By contrast, all these words appear in EC at least once, appearing both «values» and «responsibility/-ties» on the top of the frequency list (7). This fact points out a non-accidental reluctance to use a family of words that can easily provoke disagreements amongst people. If so, that is quite understandable. After many meetings and debates, a final document that could satisfy all the state members of the UN Assembly was a crucial goal, because the desired unanimous approval of the Agenda could not be jeopardized. Its strength and future influence depended on it. Nevertheless, although A2030 remarks the leading role that science and technology must play in executing the SDGs; the normative dimension of sustainable development cannot be ignored, despite the practical difficulties that often appear when dealing with values (James 2016, Motilal 2015, Stephens 2016). In fact, «indeed, making explicit what values are included [in A2030] and which ones are excluded, will open these values to deliberation, identify blind spots, and ultimately sharpen the overall relevance of the 2030 Agenda as a normative compass for development» (Schneider *et al.* 2019, p. 1602). Thus, in this ethical dimension A2030 should be kept open to revision and interpretation. EC is quite conscious of the necessity of a new ethical framework and expresses insistent demands to act soon and boldly: «[We need] a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility» (EC 2000, p. 4); «fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions, and ways of living» (EC 2000, p. 1), and «we urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community» (EC 2000, p. 1).

### 3.3. Spirit

The end of the second paragraph in the «Preamble» of EC reads: «The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust». Also, three paragraphs later, «[...] kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature». The consciousness of the spiritual dimension often finds expression in EC whereas it is not present in A2030; for instance, the word «spiritual» is absent there (together with the words «joy», «beauty», «hope», and «reverence»), while the word «spirit» appears twice simply as a synonym of «mood» or «frame of mind». Again, this divergence between EC and A2030 could have an influence on the progression of sustainable development: «Along with science, economics, and policy, the world's religions, spiritual perspectives, and ethical values can play a catalyzing role in moving the human community toward a sustainable future» (Clugston 2016, p. 159). Certainly, that all basic human needs must be satisfied is a fundamental goal in A2030, but full human development

does not finish here; in fact, this is just a previous condition for its achievement. For this reason, the ethical and spiritual dimension could establish the so-called «fourth pillar» for sustainable development, in addition to the social, economic, and environmental ones (Burford *et al.* 2013). An intelligent management, assisted by scientists and economists, is necessary, but heartless management just worsens the situation: «Is our only relationship to nature one of engineering it for the better? Perhaps what is as much to be managed is this earth-eating, managerial mentality that has caused the environmental crisis in the first place [...]. “Hands” (the root of “manage”, again) are also for holding in loving care» (Rolston III 2006, p. 312).

## 4 Laudato si’ compared with Agenda 2030

The 2015 encyclical of the actual Pope has raised a good deal of interest, that extends beyond its addressees, the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout its 180 pages, LS reflects on many intense issues related to sustainable development; for instance, pollution, loss of biodiversity, common good, global inequality, consumerism, and intergenerational justice. Its message is a call for reflection and action, in a way that does not allow indifference. That is why, although the encyclical and the 2030 Agenda are formally in different spheres and do not share the same goals, it seems appropriate to compare them regarding fundamental human values. When considering the list of words established in Table 1, we find that 8 of the 10 more frequent words in LS belong to set S2. Most remarkable are the extensive uses of «ecology/-gical», which appears 80 times in the text, and «ecosystem/-ms» (23). As might be expected, the word «spiritual» is present (16), but its frequency is clearly surpassed by «love» (61), «relationship/-ps» (60) and «care» (34), which are terms not restricted to a religious context, that make a direct appeal for personal involvement. In this sense, the recurrences to «responsibility/-ties» (37), «common good» (32) and «ethic/-cs» (26) make it explicit that the call should be answered according to the concrete duties and capacities of each one. Nevertheless, LS not only describes many features of our global crisis and asks for a change, but it also identifies its origins and outlines «the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us» (LS 2015, p. 121).

Firstly, the use of three words, «causes» (16), «roots» (7) and «reasons» (5), are obvious signs of its interest in the origins of our current condition. At the same time, it is also remarkable that not one of these three words appear once in A2030. Of course, the answers that LS offers in chapter 3 to the question about the origins

of our crisis (global technocratic paradigm and modern anthropocentrism) can be discussed, but what is worth here is the resolution to not avoid the question, because without a clear diagnostic of the illness there is no guarantee that the treatment will be effective enough. Secondly, its wide call to dialogue includes all the various parts that have an influence on the results (international community, national and local policies, decision-making procedures, politics, and economy, among them): «We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all» (LS 2015, p. 12). This is a crucial point when the focus is put on dialogue; it is necessary to establish proper mechanisms that facilitate the participation of «all people involved». Ismid Hadad expressed it most clearly in a public hearing organized by the authors of the BR: «You don't know the answers nor the solutions, but you could suggest the way to solve many problems, and this is by suggesting either to governments, or the UN, or international agencies, to solve any problem the best way: that is to include those with direct interests in it. The beneficiaries, as well as the victims of any development issue should be included, should be heard» (WCED 1987, p. 49).

Finally, another couple of words in Table 1 open the door to a new issue that will also be pondered in the next section. «Beauty/-iful» and «joy/-yful» appear 42 and eight times in LS respectively and, once more, they are disregarded in A2030.

## 5 A more holistic view of human beings

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the word «development» has many synonyms; for example, «evolution», «growth», «maturing», «expansion», «enlargement», «spread», «buildout», «progress», «success», and «blossoming». Each of them may be used to move in a particular direction, to pursue a specific goal or interest. This explains why this word is only a starting point that can lead to quite different outcomes. When the adjective «sustainable» (or «human») is added, the scope diminishes but some ambiguity remains, since any conception of sustainable (or human) development incorporates ethical and political choices (Mitcham 1995, Owens 2003). For this reason, it is both desirable and unavoidable that moral values should be present whenever sustainable development is explored or planned. Instrumental and monetary values are not the only ones to be considered when assessing criteria and alternatives for development; intrinsic, shared, and ecological values should also be considered (Arias-Arévalo *et al.* 2018). In this sense, a more holistic view of human beings is required in which non-economic values are not ignored. Thus, the context is always a living conversation with many voices that cannot simply be replaced by

a spreadsheet. Distinct cultures have different ideas about the distinctive nature of well-being or what constitutes a meaningful life (Konik 2018, Kothari *et al.* 2014, O'Neill *et al.* 2008). In the case of the human-nature relationship, Poole (2018) argues that, by ignoring local ecological knowledge and biocultural heritage, the SDGs underestimate and may even undermine the value of cultural sovereignty. For many years, this abuse has been formally denounced by indigenous peoples from all around the world (Kari-Oca-1 1992, Anchorage 2009, Kari-Oca-2 2012), and they continue to have many good reasons for doing so.

Ethical interpretations of the human-nature relationship are often present in debates on sustainable development, particularly when analysing the SDGs. This opens up the possibility of considering the experience of nature as a socio-cultural value (Keitsch 2018). In this context, it has an influence on quality of life and well-being. It allows us to recognize that we do not simply live «from» nature, but «in» nature, since our human existence makes no sense when it is conceived as separate from it. It is also interesting to note that, according to empirical research by Kals & Maes (2002), emotional affinity towards nature is a good predictor of sustainable behaviour, in such a way that the decision to act in a sustainable way «[...] is not exclusively based on cognitions of responsibility and justice, but also to a great part on moral emotions and personal identification with the natural surrounding» (Kals and Maes 2002, p. 115). For Carson (1965, p. 58), emotions and feelings are prior to our interest in knowing: «[...] it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow». The role that both moral emotions and feelings play in individuals should not be forgotten, when considering social issues, as they are a necessary condition for the recognition of the intrinsic value of one's fellow human beings. But this is ignored when people disappear in the discourse on development and are replaced by quantitative indicators concerning a whole society. For Seghezze, «merging individuals and society into one single dimension might fail to capture the complexity of human behaviour and the relevance of personal relationships for sustainability» (Seghezze 2009, p. 551).

Perhaps, the main criticism of the inclusion of values and feelings (aesthetical, moral, or spiritual) in the sustainable development debate is that, firstly, there is no univocal understanding of these concepts and, secondly, due to this ambiguity, it is not possible to measure them. Consequently, these aspects cannot be included in the analysis. Below we outline how this criticism can be addressed. Firstly, every day we use many concepts that are not equally understood by all those who use them. This happens, for instance, with words like «fair», «beautiful», or «expensive». The meaning associated with them depends on who is speaking, where,

and under what circumstances. Nevertheless, what is required and expected is a common usage of these words, a shared interpretation of their meaning inside a community of speakers of the same language. In every situation, what is needed is a common understanding of how to use them and what they imply. The demand for a univocal and universal meaning for every concept we use would render communication impossible. Secondly, there is evidence that it is possible to work with indicators related to values (Dahl 2012, Shepherd *et al.* 2009), and the main reason for this was mentioned in the previous point; namely, to have a measure of the presence of these values or feelings, a shared understanding is enough. This understanding will be restricted to a certain community of people, but this is not a problem; for instance, when considering different professions, we find that some values are present in all of them but in different senses. The concept of «accuracy» may be used by a lawyer, a physicist, and a sociologist with a different meaning in each case, but within each profession «accuracy» can be evaluated by means of one or more criteria. These final considerations may help us to understand why sustainable development cannot be packaged into a set of practices, recommendations, and policies available to be implemented mechanically worldwide. Diverse cultures and communities have different needs, visions, and understandings that should not be undervalued, especially when they do not match with the needs, visions, and understandings shared by the Westernized nations.

## 6 Conclusions

Sustainable development (sustainability) is an old label that today cannot be avoided, despite its shortcomings and ambiguities. It is a useful concept and makes sense. Even so, just to «sustain» something may be reasonable, but in many cases, it does not seem satisfactory, due to the discordance with the idea of real progress or enhancement (Marcuse 1998). Certainly, in the presence of the actual global crisis the development we need must be reliable. Otherwise, the result could worsen the disasters we are responsible for. Nevertheless, without ignoring the difficulties that can appear in the way of development, justice, harmony, and beauty should not be ignored. We have the knowledge and the means necessary to act with determination towards a skyline of peace and happiness amongst us and with nature.

After the eight 2000-2015 Millennium Development Goals (UN 2000), the UN was able to approve an ensuing, and more ambitious, plan for development, the 17 SDGs. In the new agenda, we are all included, with different responsibilities and at distinct levels. This is so because, in a globalized world, many harmful effects in

a territory (e.g., air and water pollution) may have its causes (e.g., rate of production and consumption) in another faraway region. The recognition of these responsibilities and duties towards present and future generations (Marquardt 2006) have been an important advance, but it is not enough. The world is one, and all human beings constitute a community of life together with all the other non-human beings on Earth (Basart 2021). Therefore, the happiness and well-being of a small part of its inhabitants cannot depend on the suffering and misery of millions. This is not good, and we already know that it is not possible either. Additional steps are necessary to strengthen the recognition of the many links and interdependences amongst us and with the ecosystems; from this recognition, courageous changes should follow.

This work contributes to highlight the limitations of the Agenda 2030, and to broaden the view into other previous documents that should not be ignored, because they address a more holistic view of human beings. So, the Agenda lacks some significant and relevant elements that are related to our social and economic development. And, whenever sustainable development is more development than sustainable, the result is the imposition of never-ending economic growth which takes precedence over everything that makes life worth living. The authors of the BR saw it clearly many years ago: «The issues we have raised in this report are inevitably of far-reaching importance to the quality of life on earth – indeed to life itself. We have tried to show how human survival and well-being could depend on success in elevating sustainable development to a global ethic» (WCED 1987, p. 211).

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