



# **FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

**REPORT OF THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS' WORKSHOP  
HELD IN BARCELONA  
FROM 22<sup>nd</sup> TO 24<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2007**

Organized by UNESCOCAT — Centre UNESCO de Catalunya

Dr. Jordi Pigem, editor

© 2007 UNESCOCAT — Centre UNESCO de Catalunya

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## I. INTRODUCTION

### I.1. Purpose and Context of the Meeting

### I.2. Participants

### I.3. Two Notes on Language

#### I.3.1. A Plea for Non-Technical Language

#### I.3.2. 'Sustainability', 'Development', 'Life'

### I.4. A Time for Radical Transformation

#### I.4.1. Learning to Dance in the Earthquake

## II. EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN A WORLD OF DIVERSITY

### II.1. The Emerging New Sensibility

#### II.1.1 Overcoming the Religion of Materialism

#### II.1.2. A Comparison with the Earth Charter

### II.2. Five Core Values

#### II.2.1. Promoting Planetary Awareness

##### II.2.1.1. Embracing Interdependence

#### II.2.2. Caring for Future Generations

#### II.2.3. Nurturing Bioregional Cultures and Local Knowledge

##### II.2.3.1. Fostering Local Knowledge

##### II.2.3.2. Taking Cultural Diversity Seriously

##### II.2.3.3. Beyond Science and Environmentalism

#### II.2.4. Expanding Our Ethical Horizon

##### II.2.4.1. Redefining Progress and Happiness

##### II.2.4.2. Rediscovering Our Place in the World

##### II.2.4.3. Walking Our Talk

#### II.2.5. Celebrating Life

##### II.2.5.1. Updating Images, Prayers and Parables

##### II.2.5.2. Renewing Hope

### II.3. Transforming Education

#### II.3.1. Education: Formal vs. Non-Formal

#### II.3.2. Exploring e-tools

#### II.3.3. Integrating Two Kinds of Knowledge

#### II.3.4. Two Target Groups

## III. OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### III.1. General Outcomes

### III.2. Specific Recommendations

III.2.1. For Faith-Based Organizations

III.2.2. For UNESCO

# I. INTRODUCTION

## I.1. Purpose and Context of the Meeting

The International Experts' Workshop on Faith-based Organizations and Education for Sustainability was in itself an example of the planetary awareness and intercultural understanding that is emerging in our time. Taking place in the early years of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014), starting on Water Day and right after the spring equinox, the Workshop brought together experts representing a wide range of approaches, including eight faith-based traditions (Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Gandhian, Hindu, Jewish, Indigenous, and Islamic). The experts came from all continents but Antarctica, in a spirit of mutual understanding, celebration, and awareness of the challenges of our time. The Workshop can be regarded as an important step in the deepening of the global dialogue called for by the Earth Charter.<sup>1</sup>

The Workshop aimed to explore how the strengths and perspectives of faith-based organizations can be mobilized in the service of education for sustainability. As Mary Evelyn Tucker noted in her keynote speech, religions have always helped to shape civilizations and cultures through their stories, symbols, rituals and ethics, and "now they are being called to assist in the great transition to a viable future for all species". Faith-based traditions could provide "sustaining visions and values to shape our emerging planetary civilization", acting as "midwives" for the birth of planetary awareness and intergenerational responsibility. Faith-based traditions add a broader, deeper and necessary dimension to the usually more technical and pragmatic focus of sustainable development.<sup>2</sup> In fact, "religions invented education" (Ranchor Prime). They can therefore play an essential role in education for sustainability, helping to tap into cosmologies, values, symbols, rituals and celebrations that can inspire our journey toward a sustainable and life-enhancing world.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the second paragraph of "The Way Forward", The Earth Charter states: "Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom."

<sup>2</sup> As its chairman Hiro Sakurai explained, the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations, composed of the representatives of national and international organizations which define their work as religious, spiritual or ethical in nature and are accredited to the UN, has been active since 1972. A more recent initiative is the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, that emerged from the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace held at the United Nations headquarters on 22 June 2005.

## I.2. Participants

Besides the twenty-one international experts listed below, local authorities and UNESCOCAT staff participated in some or all of the sessions of the Workshop:

Dr. Abelardo BRENES, University for Peace / Earth Charter International, Costa Rica.

Bernard COMBES, Programme for Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO, Paris.

Somboon CHUNGPRAMPREE, International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Thailand.

Dr. Arthur DAHL, International Environment Forum, Switzerland.

Victoria FINLAY, Alliance for Religions and Conservation, United Kingdom.

Peter GICIRA, All Africa Conference of Churches, Kenya.

Jorge ISHIZAWA, Andean Peasant Technologies Project (PRATEC), Peru.

Fazlun KHALID, Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, United Kingdom.

Dr. Mathew KOSHY, Joint Ecological Commission, India.

Kirti MENON, Gandhi Centenary Committee, South Africa.

Dr. Mary Joy PIGOZZI, UNESCO High Level Panel on ESD, USA.

Ranchor PRIME, Friends of Vrindavan, United Kingdom.

Mayra RODRÍGUEZ, Ecumenical Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Guatemala.

Hiro SAKURAI, Soka Gakkai International, Japan/USA.

Susanne SCHNUTTGEN, Division for Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue, UNESCO, Paris.

Michael SLABY, Earth Charter International, Sweden.

Christian TEODORESCU, Ecumenical Association of Churches, Romania.

Prof. Mary Evelyn TUCKER, Forum on Religion and Ecology, Harvard University, USA.

Philippe VAZ, Tariqqa Al Alawiyya, France.

Billy WAPOTRO, Alliance Scolaire, New Caledonia.

Rabbi Arthur WASKOW, The Shalom Center, USA.

## I.3. Two Notes on Language

This report aims to synthesize and convey the gist of what was stated, discussed and implied in the Workshop. Besides the words of the participants, reproduced verbatim whenever possible and appropriate, the report also weaves in some of the materials that were circulated or discussed, in particular the Earth Charter, widely regarded as a comprehensive and inclusive framework for sustainability. The following two notes on the language used in this report might be relevant:

### I.3.1. A Plea for Non-Technical Language

A number of participants made a plea for everyday language, avoiding technical jargon, in the discourse on sustainability. Reaching the people should be a priority, and this requires that they can relate to our language.<sup>3</sup> Only when exclusively dealing with the “establishment” may jargon be required.

---

<sup>3</sup> As an example of radically adapting language to reach people, Kirti Menon reported on a “Gandhi comic” that has been distributed freely to the schools in South Africa. The technical language might be one of the

In the same way, we need questions that can mobilize the people. Most values that were relevant a century ago are still relevant today, but we need new ways to convey them. This is particularly relevant when dealing with issues like sustainability, less immediately dramatic and “photogenic” than other causes that can more readily attract funding.

### I.3.2. ‘Sustainability’, ‘Development’, ‘Life’

Former Secretary General of the UN Kofi Annan wrote: “Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract —sustainable development— and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people”. The notion of “sustainable development” does indeed sound abstract. Arthur Dahl warned the IUCN that “sustainable development” is a “lousy” and “awkward” term, and that a different word should be sought, one able to catch up and inspire. Ranchor Prime described “sustainable development” as “an oxymoron”. In fact, the notion of “development” has become increasingly contested in some areas, particularly by those that see it inextricably linked to the unsustainable pursuit of endless economic growth. It is also a term that doesn’t fare well in other cultures. A page of UNESCO’s website asks visitors to write “sustainable development” in their own language. Some respond that no such thing can be said, others respond with a 50-word definition. In fact, “sustainability” is best practiced by indigenous societies that are still rooted in their traditional culture, land and spirituality, and are unfamiliar with such a term.

It was suggested that in its early years the notion of *sustainability* may have been able to take centre stage only by getting into an uneasy marriage with *development*. Not everyone in the workshop criticized the notion of “sustainable development” —Abelardo Brenes, in particular, made a case for the social and human rights beneficial aspects of development— but most of the experts expressed mixed feelings (to say the least) about this notion and criticized it as inefficient or self-defeating. In fact, none of the experts directly representing faith-based organizations appeared to be comfortable with this term. A suggested alternative that received ample endorsement (particularly, but not solely, from the non-Western experts) was *sustainable life* or *sustainable living*, more understandable and appealing. A shift of language towards “sustainable life” was called for in a number of ways. It was suggested that instead of “Education for Sustainable Development” it would be more appropriate, appealing, inspiring, and effective to speak of *Education for Sustainable Living*. Nevertheless, given that there wasn’t a complete consensus on this phrasing, this report resorts to the more neutral and widely used terms “Sustainability” and “Education for Sustainability”.

## I.4. A Time for Radical Transformation

In her keynote address, Prof. Tucker emphasized the unique character of our time: “we are” — as she put it— “at the cusp of a big transition”. The uniqueness of this transition is widely acknowledged. In the words of Rachel Carson, quoted in one of the documents distributed to the participants, “we are challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves”. The Earth Charter Preamble states that “we risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life”, and therefore “fundamental changes are needed in our values, institutions and ways of living”, while its concluding section, “The Way Forward”, after acknowledging that “as never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning”, ends with a reminder of the magnitude of the transition we are called to go through: “Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life”.

Ours is “a new axial period” (in Prof. Tucker’s words) calling for pluralism and planetary awareness. Our human and ecological predicament requires the cross-fertilization of all religious traditions. The humility to open up to the experience of other cultures and religions, to become intercultural and interreligious, is necessary for a viable human life on a sustainable planet. Perhaps, as suggested by Michael Slaby, we should regard the period until 2015

---

factors that help explain why only 2% of the groups contacted answered a questionnaire on education for sustainability forwarded by UNESCO.

(Millennium Development Goals, DESD) as “a sacred time” in human history.

#### **I.4.1. Learning to Dance in the Earthquake**

As Prof. Tucker stated, “the forces threatening all the living communities, human and non-human, cannot be minimized or ignored”. The modern “military-industrial mindset” has generated what she described as the multiple threats of “over” and “under”: overdevelopment and undernourishment, overconsumption and undereducation, overpopulation and underemployment, overmilitarization and undersecurity. These threats run against the values cherished by religious communities for millennia. As Rabbi Arthur Waskow stated, “the whole world is today in an earthquake: politics, economics, sexuality... all is off the ground. People look for something that isn’t quaking, desperately trying to find something stable, and so they don’t pay attention to the state of the Earth”. Our calling today, as Rabbi Waskow emphatically put it, is like “learning to dance in an earthquake”. This quaking will transform everything, including religions: “We know what religious traditions were like three hundred years ago, but we don’t know how they will be after learning to dance in an earthquake”.

## II. EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN A WORLD OF DIVERSITY

### II.1. The Emerging New Sensibility

As Mary Evelyn Tucker pointed out, sustainable development is usually regarded as “an uneasy alliance of ecology and economics”. This is, however, a very narrow conception. Sustainability needs to be placed in a larger, spiritually inspired context that includes the following major elements:

- 1) Planetary awareness.
- 2) Caring for future generations.
- 3) Nurturing bioregional cultures and local knowledge.
- 4) Expanding our ethical horizon.
- 5) Celebrating life.<sup>4</sup>

The world’s religions can play a major role in fostering this fivefold emerging sensibility.

#### II.1.1. Overcoming the Religion of Materialism

Our modern so-called secular world is in fact a religion of consumerism and capitalism (Prof. Tucker). We are literally addicted to oil and consumerism (Rabbi Waskow). “The West has managed to turn hedonism from a hindrance to genuine life into a virtue” (Ranchor Prime).

Dr. Mary Joy Pigozzi noted that the DESD is not just about the environment, it’s about social change and about transforming economic and political structures. It should therefore, as pointed out by Fazlun Khalid, also have an impact on institutions like the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. Sustainability is not possible unless we overcome our worship of economic growth and our subtle identification of money with fulfillment. People in the UK, it was noted, are keen to switch off lights, but they are in no way willing to accept paying green taxes on fuel.

“Materialism has become the dominant faith of our world” and religions must now help to dematerialize our world view (Dr. Dahl). One way of countering consumerism would be to set limits to the advertising industry and to explicitly teach children and adults how to critically evaluate adverts (Rabbi Waskow). Faith-based traditions have the possibility of presenting an alternative vision to counter the allure of endless consumption and endless economic growth, which is “devouring the planet and driving humans toward a precipice of no return”.

#### II.1.2. A Comparison with the Earth Charter

As stated above, the Earth Charter is widely regarded as a comprehensive and inclusive framework for sustainability. There is a consistent overlap between the Earth Charter and the five core values that emerged in the Workshop. However, some differences of emphasis might be pointed out. Three of these core values seem to be sufficiently addressed by the Earth Charter. Thus, *planetary awareness* is explicitly or implicitly present throughout it; *expanding our ethical horizon* to include issues of ecological justice is, likewise, present in many of the principles and paragraphs of the Earth Charter, and *caring for future generations* corresponds to principle 4. The remaining two values are somehow less represented, not appearing in the phrasing of any the 16 principles of the Charter, but they are not missing: *celebrating life* is praised in the very last sentence of the Earth Charter, and *cultural diversity* is implicit or explicit in several subprinciples: 8b, 12b, 12d and 13f, as well as in “The Way Forward”.

It is not surprising that a Workshop drawing on the culturally diverse perspectives of faith-based traditions put more emphasis on cultural diversity and celebration. Even if the creation of the Earth Charter might be considered “the most open and participatory worldwide consultation

---

<sup>4</sup> Prof. Tucker’s original list included the first four elements, some stated in more technical terms: *planetary awareness*, *intergenerational responsibility*, *bioregional commitment* and *ecojustice ethics*. The fifth one, *celebrating life*, was widely advocated throughout the Workshop, right from the opening session.



process ever associated with the drafting of an international declaration”, from the perspective of faith-based traditions and non-Western cultures it might not have given enough relevance to cultural diversity and celebration.<sup>5</sup>

## II.2. Five Core Values

### II.2.1. Planetary Awareness

According to Mary Evelyn Tucker, in our day “all traditions are realizing that our common ground is the Earth itself”. Religious traditions are being called to come together (without losing their identities) and to renew themselves to be ushered into their “ecological phase”. We are learning to see people and planet as not separate, to regard the social and biological well-being as one continuum. A very rich and vibrant range of people is moving into ecotheology (in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and other traditions).

While the currently emerging planetary awareness is new in a number of ways, religions have traditionally embodied values that are akin to it. Mary Evelyn Tucker gave examples from three Asian traditions:

- Confucianism acknowledges the essential kinship of all beings among themselves and with Heaven and Earth, kinship that finds its highest expression in compassion. This kinship is expressed in the famous words from Chang Tsai’s *Western Inscription* (11<sup>th</sup> century): “Heaven is my Father and Earth is my Mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst”.<sup>6</sup> The human is regarded as completing Heaven and Earth, rather than separate from the Earth.

- Daoism stresses the microcosm-macrocosm relation between the human and the Earth, which are seen as interacting all the time. The *qi* running through the human body is the same *qi* circulating in the Earth, and many practices related to Daoism (like Qi Gong and acupuncture) build on this kinship between humans and nature.

- Hinduism, similarly, expresses a microcosm-macrocosm awareness in the concept of *mahapurusha*, the Great Person or Cosmic Person associated with the maintenance of all life.

#### II.2.1.1. Embracing Interdependence

In the modern West matter has been divorced from spirit, but in other traditions there is no such split. The Daoist notion of *qi* refers neither to dispirited matter nor intangible spirit. Matter should be revalued.

Billy Wapoto explained that in his native Melanesian culture, rather than living by “cogito ergo sum” they have traditionally understood that “it is *the other* who causes my existence”: “if the other doesn’t exist, I don’t exist; if the other suffers, I suffer”. Note that in this context *other* is not restricted to fellow human beings: it includes the ocean, trees, stones, water and “the whole of creation”. Each native clan is specifically related to a natural feature (Wapoto, for instance, means “the tree”).

Many indigenous traditions have a sense that all things are connected. The Hindu and Buddhist

---

<sup>5</sup> This conclusion is consistent with the high-level roundtable on “Cultural Diversity and Biodiversity for Sustainable Development” held during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2002 (i.e., after the drafting of the Earth Charter), jointly convened by UNESCO and UNEP and chaired by Jacques Chirac: one of its outcomes was the need (as stated by Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand) “of taking the triple bottom line into the quadruple bottom line by adding culture to the environmental, economic and social aspects of sustainability”.

<sup>6</sup> The quote continues: “Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. [...] All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.” Chang Tsai’s *Western Inscription*, so called for having been inscribed on the western wall of his study, was enormously influential in Neo-Confucian thought. See [environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/confucianism/texts/index.html#5](http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/confucianism/texts/index.html#5).

notion of *karma* reflects a profound sense of the interrelatedness of all things, including our relatedness to other species. The interdependence of the whole of reality is even more profoundly conveyed by the Buddhist notion of *pratityasamutpada* (“interdependent arising”). Nothing is fully independent or isolated. Our actions and intentions send ripples in all directions.

### II.2.2. Caring for Future Generations

Mary Evelyn Tucker began her keynote speech by asking the participants “to reflect on the well-being of our children —the children of every continent and the children of every species”, to think for the long term and to envision a lively planetary civilization for those who come after us. “We do not inherit the Earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children” (Saint-Exupéry, as quoted by Philippe Vaz).

In contrast with modern individualism, traditional sustainable societies had a sense of care for ancestors and for future generations. As Sheik Khaled Bentounès asked (in a paper delivered at the Workshop by his disciple Philippe Vaz), “let us act so that our children and the future generations do not curse us!”.

### II.2.3. Nurturing Bioregional Cultures and Local Knowledge

Among the estimated 6,000 languages spoken today, most of them indigenous and tuned to the ecosystems and rhythms of a particular bioregion, nearly 2,500 are in immediate danger of extinction. Nurturing local cultures and languages is part and parcel of preserving the ecological integrity of a bioregion.

#### II.2.3.1. Fostering Local Knowledge

The general and abstract knowledge that we draw from contemporary science needs to be complemented with the local knowledge still preserved by traditional cultures and indigenous peoples. They can help us to rediscover a sense of belonging to our place and to reconnect with the cycles of nature and the seasons. Mayra Rodríguez explained that sustainability starts at the local level and must respect local cultures (which in the case of Guatemala requires awareness of the traditional Mayan cosmology and spirituality). As Peter Gicira noted, colonialism in Africa imposed a fragmentation of the land (traditionally the land was so sacred that it couldn’t have individual ownership), and it would be very beneficial for African societies to be able to reclaim their traditional stories and cultural practices.

Native culture and language “is the basis of our relation to life” but “we are in exile in our own country” (Billy Wapotro). Sustainability requires the affirmation of local, place-based cultures and languages. A relevant example is PRATEC’s implementation of Nuclei of Andean Cultural Affirmation (NACAs).

#### II.2.3.2. Taking Cultural Diversity Seriously

There is a *core link between cultural diversity and biodiversity*. As Susanne Schnuttgen stated, education for sustainability must “take into account the cultural aspirations, identities, different ways of living, knowledge systems, values systems, religions, traditions and beliefs of all concerned”, while nurturing “the creative capacities and cultural expressions of human beings, in their multiple tangible and intangible forms, notably in seeking and imagining new ways of living together”. Part of this task is to protect local ethnic minorities, as in the work with Romani people (more widely but improperly known as Gypsies) that Christian Teodorescu reported.

Cultures and faith-based traditions shouldn’t give up their calling because the world has become secular. As Rabbi Waskow noted, in the US some Jewish organizations tried to adapt to the secular world by giving up their traditional rituals and practices (losing therefore their uniqueness and spiritual force), while Black churches praying in the streets had a huge political impact.

The belief in One Truth that should be imposed on all cultures is to a large extent a Western peculiarity. The modern, secular and scientific worldview cannot be taken, as is usually and implicitly done, as universal and superior to the views of nature from other cultures and

traditions. These should be encouraged to step into an ecological phase (if they are not there yet) and treated as fully valid forms of understanding nature and our place in the cosmos — rather than being treated, as is often the case, as mere folklore. We must make room. Embracing the pluralism that our age calls for implies that sustainability and environmental ethics must be place-based rather than universal: they should have diverse expressions according to the environmental context and the local culture, while keeping a strong sense of planetary awareness and kinship with other communities and other forms of life. We need formulations of ecojustice congenial to (and emerging from) every culture and religion.

### II.2.3.3. Beyond Science and Environmentalism

Environmental education, nowadays increasingly practiced, is clearly related to education for sustainability. This latter notion, however, is broader. It includes not only educating about how nature works, but about how humankind relates to nature and to future generations. It includes what science can teach us about the cycles of nature and the Earth and our impact on them, but it also encompasses issues of social justice, cultural diversity and the reevaluation of our place in the cosmos. Education for sustainability must point towards the broader values embraced by the Earth Charter, aiming towards “a change of mind and heart”, the cultivation of the “precious heritage” of “cultural diversity” and the awareness that “human solidarity and 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”. Religions can play a major role in fostering these values.

Science provides us with useful but limited understanding, that should be handled with humility. At the end of the day, as noted by Arthur Dahl, science doesn't give us a message of hope and people don't change behaviour based on scientific data. As has often been noted, we can only really care for what we love. We need awe and reverence for life (see II.2.5), not just intellectual understanding.

### II.2.4. Expanding Our Ethical Horizon

Social justice has been an important concern in Abrahamic religions. Now we are called to extend our notions of justice, embracing the sacredness of all forms of life and granting rights to other species, ecosystems and the Earth as whole. As Thomas Berry (quoted by Prof. Tucker) remarks, our moral concerns should include *biocide* and *ecocide* as well as homicide and genocide. This wider ethics calls for *solidarity* with the entire Earth, ecological *sustainability*, lifestyles of *sufficiency*, and a more *participatory* politics.

As Dr. Brenes stated, the modern Western stress on rights should be complemented with a parallel emphasis on *responsibility*, the capacity to respond appropriately to our situation and our context.

#### II.2.4.1. Redefining Progress and Happiness

We must renew our notions of “progress”, “prosperity” and “development”. Much of what went under these names in the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced mixed blessings or had a boomerang effect. The Jewish practice of a sabbatical year after six years of work and money-making was a traditional way of putting a rein on unlimited growth. Dr. Mary Joy Pigozzi noted that ‘development’ needs to embrace ‘well-being’ and ‘spirituality’. One recent and significant step is to replace our zealous pursuit of a higher GDP (that knows of no other reality than money) with a more humane aspiration: Gross National Happiness, promoted in recent years by a number of international conferences initially launched in Bhutan. Gross National Happiness, as reported by Somboon Chungprampree, has four pillars: good governance, cultural autonomy, environmental justice, and an economy providing enough for basic needs in a sustainable way.<sup>7</sup>

We need positive alternative lifestyles that don't depend on material things. As Dr. Dahl emphasized, these can be most readily provided by religions. Religions have the power to open us up to something bigger than our individual selves.

---

<sup>7</sup> The next international conference on Gross National Happiness will be held in Thailand on 22<sup>nd</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> November 2007.

#### II.2.4.2. Rediscovering our Place in the World

Sustainability is strongly related with our sense of place in the cosmos. We need a new relationship with ourselves, with nature and with the wider scheme of things. Fazlun Khalid, quoting Richard Tarnas, argued that since Descartes the modern world view has desacralized the world and, while claiming not to be anthropocentric, has subtly put the human mind at the centre of all things, cutting itself off from nature and the cosmos. Religions provide a sense of belonging to the cosmos and can play a key role in shaping the new relation to the world that humanity is now called to embrace.

#### II.2.4.3. Walking Our Talk

As a Western expert reminded us, the West has plundered the world and therefore it is hypocritical that we want to preach sustainability to other cultures. Many participants emphasized that it would be totally immoral to *tell* people in the poor South not to have cars and hi-tech gadgets unless we ourselves grow out of our consumerist lifestyles. On the other hand, the West is now plagued with a host of psychological problems and new illnesses. People consuming more are no happier —no surprise to those that have studied spiritual texts.

For Gandhi, as Ranchor Prime reminded us, freedom arises from *swaraj*, self-rule: learning to rule our own selves. Sustainability, likewise, must start in our own selves. As Mary Joy Pigozzi put it, ultimately the DESD “is about *us* changing”, in our daily lives as much as in our aspirations. “The means you use will become the ends you strive for” (Martin Buber). “Be the change you want to see in the world” (Gandhi). There is no way to sustainability, sustainability is the way.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, we must be honest enough to stop playing the game of denial. “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter” (Martin Luther King). “Churches at their best must cause trouble” and “dance around the rule” (rabbi Arthur Waskow). We can’t wait for presidents and “leaders” to lead us. As Bernard Combes and Mary Joy Pigozzi stated, bodies like UNESCO can push initiatives forward “but these need to be initiated by people”. It is up to all of us to hold our governments and institutions accountable and “make them stop destroying the world”.

### II.2.5. Celebrating Life

Celebration is essential, as Victoria Finlay emphasized. Having fun is a good way of countering individualism and competition. Faith-based traditions offer us a sense of beauty and harmony, often conveyed through inspiring aphorisms and stories, that needs to be integrated into sustainability. Festivals and ritual celebrations can enhance our awareness of the cycles of nature, the Sun and the Moon. In the Andean region PRATEC is successfully reintroducing traditional agricultural festivities into the school calendar.

Most participants agreed that *awe* is necessary to achieve a sustainable life. The best of science can provide awe and wonder, but awe at the scientific, intellectual level, doesn’t last and doesn’t reach deep enough, while spiritual celebrations strike very deep in the heart of people. Awe at life is most fully expressed through rituals. In most indigenous cosmologies, harmony with the local world or bioregion is achieved and sustained by *ritual* activity: “without it I cannot see how to achieve sustainable living” (Jorge Ishizawa).

#### II.2.5.1. Updating Images, Prayers and Parables

If religions are alive they have to keep renewing themselves, addressing the specific needs of the day. This is particularly true in our age of unprecedented challenges, in our “new axial period” (see I.4.). Dr. Mathew Koshy provided an example of how to retell a traditional Christian

---

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO is launching an “awareness programme” in order to reduce its own environmental impact, including everyday office work. It reminds staff about basic sustainability practices (recycling, switching off lights) and covers 4 areas: water, transport, energy and paper.

parable from an ecojustice point of view.<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Arthur Waskow explained that Judaism began as an indigenous religion in which sacrifices were originally offers of local food. Its connection with the Earth was eventually lost and now must be renewed. A wealth of examples of how this updating to the spirit of the times can take place were provided at the Workshop:

- If a new church is to be built, make it an example of ecological architecture.
- Perform tree planting celebrations. Planting trees can be seen as a Eucharist. Buddhist monks in Siam/Thailand have been ordaining trees to prevent deforestation. Rabbi Waskow took part in an action at the property of a company that was cutting a redwood forest: “they didn’t dare arrest a group of Jews celebrating a ritual”.
- Take traditional prayers to polluted sites.
- Liturgize new lines, e.g. “lest the Earth be utterly destroyed”.
- Take current ceremonies as opportunities to include our new values, for instance including water and earth (and an awareness of elements of the natural world) in marriage rituals.
- Include intergenerational commitment into confirmation rituals.
- Traditional words for *spirit* (in Hebrew, Greek and Latin) mean ‘air’ and ‘breath’. The Holy Spirit could be seen as the atmosphere.
- *Hosanna* means “please save”. It was uttered, for instance, to ask for the land to be saved from draughts, locusts, etc. Today it could be updated to ask “please save the Earth” from ecological disaster, PCBs or GMOs.
- Remember that the ten biblical plagues (that now could be regarded as ecological disasters) came in response to social oppression.
- The symposia organized on the sea by Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew are an example of both ecological and interreligious awareness.

This call is not just for religions, but for the whole of cultural life. Art can contribute to educating

---

<sup>9</sup> We quote in full Dr. Koshy’s example (cf. Luke, 12:15ff): “He went on to say to them all, ‘Watch out and guard yourselves from every kind of greed; because a person’s true life is not made up of things he owns, no matter how rich he may be’. Then Jesus told them this parable: ‘There was once a rich man who had land which yielded good crops. He was interested in Science and Technology. He appointed leading scientists from all over the world in his high-tech laboratory and asked them to bring out high-yielding rice seeds. As per the direction of the rich man the scientists started research and succeeded in bringing our high yielding genetically engineered seeds. Scientists told the rich man: “If farmers cultivate this high yielding variety of rice seeds, then famine will become a myth.” The rich man instead of appreciating them became quite astonished. He told the scientists: “ Look, you should not eradicate famine with these high tech-seeds. The farmers should come to my company for buying the high tech seeds. They are free to use these seeds, but they may not be permitted to use the seeds in the traditional way. If they make seeds in the traditional way why I should spend money?” The rich man put the scientists in a dilemma. The rich man again told them: “You have manipulated the gene to get better seeds. Using the same genetic engineering, why can’t you remove the reproductive part from the seed?” The scientists started research in this direction and at last they succeeded in bringing out seeds with the terminator gene. The farmers had to buy seeds from the company for cultivation, but they could not set apart the seeds for the next annual cultivation. The rich man became happy. He began to think for himself, I have created the best seeds of the grains which are used by the majority of the people all over the world. The farmers all over the world can purchase the best seeds from my company. The farmers will abandon the traditional seeds and will use my seeds. After some more years the other seeds will disappear and I can monopolize rice farming. Then, the farmers would have no other options and I will make profit from the sale of seeds. I will become the richest man in the world.” Then I will say to myself, “Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and enjoy yourself!”. But God said to him, ‘You fool! You have used science and technology to satisfy your greed. You were expected to use your knowledge for the welfare of all. An earthquake will destroy not only the nuclear reactors you have built, but also destroy the life in this place for many years. Your pride and your greed will be shattered within seconds. If this very night you have to give up your life, who will get all these things you have kept for yourself?’” And Jesus concluded, ‘This will be the fate of those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God’s sight.’”

for sustainability.<sup>10</sup> And the same goes for literature. As Arthur Dahl noted, Dante’s *Inferno* could be placed today in an urban traffic jam or in a scene of ecological devastation.

#### II.2.5.2. Renewing Hope

It is essential in our time to “formulate visions of hope”. Science can give us the data, but hope is more easily provided by religions. “Hope is the renewable resource of the spirit” (Prof. Tucker). Dr. Brenes reminded us that “the greatest untapped potential in nature is human potential”.

### II.3. Transforming Education

We need a new education, formal and non-formal, that fosters the five values discussed above: planetary awareness, caring for future generations, nurturing cultural diversity, expanding our ethical horizon and celebrating life. The UN should support efforts in this direction, like the DESD, with more financial resources.

There is also a perceived need to collect success stories of education for sustainability.<sup>11</sup>

#### II.3.1 Education: Formal vs. Non-Formal

Many participants noted there are important obstacles when trying to introduce sustainability into formal education:

- The curriculum is already full to the brim, and teachers are severely overworked.
- The current formal educational system is geared towards quantifiable results rather than towards real learning (not to mention towards eliciting personal transformation for the sake of sustainability).
- There are vested interests in the Ministries of Education, in the schools’ management boards and, last but not least, in the textbook industry.

A number of possibilities were suggested: having more dialogue with curriculum planners and writers, involving scholars and historians of religion, making contents more appealing, developing educational materials *with the children* (it’s exciting for them to participate), and creating multimedia tools for children to create their own educational materials. Fazlun Khalid explained that environmental ethics is being introduced in Islamic schools, and Kirti Menon reported that the school subject “Life Orientation” allows South African children to be exposed to the teachings of different religions. On the whole, though, it seems we must “reinvent the formal system” (Bernard Combes).

As Fazlun Khalid observed, non-formal education is easier, faster, and more adaptable, free of the constraints that affect formal education. It is, in a word, more alive. Rabbi Waskow recommended informal educational activities like taking children out to the forest with spiritual books —and warned against the risk of it getting formalized.

Formal or non-formal, education for sustainability should aim at learning to transform oneself and society, “to feel mutuality with nature” and to love the natural world. And we must remember that children (and all people) need *to make sense* of what they are learning.

---

<sup>10</sup> “Balancing Act” is an example of a sculptural project specifically aimed at promoting education for sustainability. See [www.balancingact.dk](http://www.balancingact.dk).

<sup>11</sup> Some excellent starting points are the websites listed in the following footnote, as well as the research synthesis on “Good Practices and Teaching/Learning Approaches & Materials of Education for Sustainable Development among Faith-Based Organizations” presented by Bernard Combes at the Barcelona Workshop. Earth Charter International aims to produce high-quality materials on education for sustainability specifically aimed at religious audiences.

### II.3.2. Exploring e-tools

The internet is a tool with many possibilities, and there are nowadays thousands of web pages devoted to sustainability.<sup>12</sup> It was suggested that it would be useful to have a Wikipedia-like website devoted to education for sustainability, in which everyone could edit and add information and in which local groups could adapt educational materials to their own culture, language and specific needs. On the other hand, it was noted that “the internet is not to be fully trusted” and “a lot of information in Wikipedia is wrong”. Such a system could be useful as long as it had sufficient editorial supervision.

It was also noted that website-based knowledge can be abstract and disembodied (luring us into a cyberspace that obliterates the life of specific real places) while ecology has to do with feeling rooted in the land and connecting with actual plants and animals. Besides, the World Wide Web is not truly worldwide: it only reaches the globalized world. We should never forget that in many parts of the world there is no electricity, so e-materials would be of no use there. Therefore, e-materials should be geared towards teaching sustainability to those living in highly developed areas, where there is a major use of the internet (see below, “Two Target Groups”, II.3.4).

Needless to say, the internet is a superb tool for linking those of us in the overdeveloped world. A good example is the work of the Bahá’i-inspired International Environment Forum,<sup>13</sup> which uses almost exclusively the internet to link its 150 members (working with governments, universities and other institutions) and works mostly through virtual conferences. It has also set up a distance course on sustainability via the internet. Once the technological infrastructure is set up, working through the internet is highly inexpensive.

### II.3.3. Integrating Two Kinds of Knowledge

Most traditional cultures perpetuated sustainable lifestyles over thousands of years through oral, non-formal education. Formal education arrived with colonialism and still embodies an overt or implicit colonial drive, teaching the ways of the West with little or no respect for the local culture, history and languages, and therefore removing natives from their most direct ties with their bioregion. Examples were provided ranging from New Caledonia (Billy Wapotro) to the Andes (Jorge Ishizawa).

As reported by Jorge Ishizawa, traditional indigenous authorities in the Andes attribute the present lack of well being and harmony in their communities to “*a generalized loss of respect among all beings*” in their local world. It is not only a matter of lack of respect between humans, but also (or mostly) of lack of respect of humans towards deities and towards nature as a whole. The local indigenous authorities see schooling as one of the major contributors to this situation: the school in the Andean region has spread the modern secularist ideology of progress and, from the cultural point of view, has been the attempt to forcibly replace traditional ways of life by Westernization disguised as modernization.

PRATEC is helping local communities in the Andean region to pursue their demand for radical cultural diversity in the school. They realize that the present educational system does not prepare young people for a good and sustainable life (parents are sorely aware of this fact). The new educational pact with the central government that the rural communities are now demanding is based on what is called *Paya Yatiwi* (in Aymara, spoken in the area of Puno) and *Iskay Yachay* (in Quechua), meaning “two kinds of knowledge”. The rural communities want these “two kinds of knowledge” to be taught at school: their own and the modern project of literacy, science and technology. *Paya Yatiwi / Iskay Yachay* has three interrelated components: a) the recovery of respect in the community (towards their deities, nature and among the

---

<sup>12</sup> There are many websites having relevant information on education for sustainability. Special mention is merited by the website of Harvard’s Forum on Religion and Ecology, which includes, among other things, an overview of one hundred successful sustainability projects classified by faith-based traditions ([www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/index.html](http://www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/index.html)), and a list of educational resources ([www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/education/index.html](http://www.environment.harvard.edu/religion/education/index.html)), as well as the website (currently being updated and renewed) of the Section for Education for Sustainable Development of UNESCO ([www.unesco.org/education/desd](http://www.unesco.org/education/desd)).

<sup>13</sup> See [www.bcca.org/ief](http://www.bcca.org/ief).

community members themselves); b) learning to read and write while respecting and valuing their oral tradition; and c) teaching the “seven skills” that allow people to “pass life”, that is, to live a good and sustainable life.

Besides these and other projects implemented in the Andean region by PRATEC, other inspiring attempts at integrating traditional and contemporary knowledge are the Graduate Program in Political Theology taught in Guatemala, involving a focus on Mayan spirituality and Ecotheology, and the “peasant to peasant” methodology developed by Bread for the World and practised in eleven Latin American countries.

#### **II.3.4. Two Target Groups**

Education for sustainability must clearly distinguish between two very different target groups: the 20% of humanity living “overdeveloped” lifestyles (including wealthy people in privileged areas of poor countries) must learn to *undevelop*, to reduce our current overconsumption and to find fulfilling lifestyles based on a much more moderate use of natural resources. But for the masses of the poor the challenge is totally different. The not-yet-overdeveloped rest of humanity, including all the poor in the South and all indigenous and traditional peoples, must learn to fulfil their needs (including running water, food security, and adequate health care) in a sustainable way and without falling into the lure of overdevelopment and consumerism. Rather than being exposed to the subtle colonialism of advertising and of series like *Dallas*, they should be offered models of non-material success. The lifestyle of the overdeveloped 20% of the world, besides consuming 80% of the Earth’s resources, generates greed and envy. In fact, as was often noted at the Workshop, not only should we in the overdeveloped world not preach sustainability to indigenous peoples: we should aim to learn from those who have been practicing sustainable lifestyles over the centuries.



## III. OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### III.1. General Outcomes

The Workshop brought together the age-old wisdom of faith-traditions with the predominantly secular, modern institutional approach to sustainability. A mutual learning emerged from this fruitful encounter:

- Religions are called *to renew and transform themselves* in order to face the unprecedented challenges of our time, to be concerned with the well-being of whole Earth community, and to discover and *embrace their ecological dimension*. This requires that faith-based traditions, without losing their identity and uniqueness, learn from each other and become much more aware of our human and ecological predicament.

- International bodies like UNESCO are called to become more aware of the *core link between cultural diversity and biodiversity*. In fact, “sustainability” is best practiced by indigenous societies that are unfamiliar with such a term and are still rooted in their traditional culture, land and spirituality. The modern, secular and scientific worldview cannot be taken, as is usually and implicitly done, as universal and superior to the views of nature from other cultures and traditions. Approaches to sustainability that subtly impose the currently hegemonic secular worldview over local and traditional knowledge, implicitly remove people from their sense of place and their cultural identity, and therefore go against the grain of true sustainability. *Education for sustainability must nurture local knowledge and cultural diversity*.

### III.2. Specific Recommendations

#### III.2.1. For Faith-Based Organizations

- Faith-based traditions should present alternative visions to counter the allure of endless consumption and endless economic growth, opening us up to something bigger than ourselves. (See II.1.1 and II.2.4.1.)
- Religious traditions should come together and renew themselves to be ushered into their ecological phase. (See II.2.1.)
- We need formulations of ecojustice congenial to (and emerging from) every culture and religion. (See II.2.3.2.)
- Our moral concerns should include *biocide* and *ecocide* as well as homicide and genocide. (See II.2.4.)
- Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. Institutions can push initiatives forward but these need to be initiated by people. (See II.2.4.3.)
- Prayers, images and parables should be updated to respond to the challenges of our time. (See II.2.5.1.)
- Visions of hope for our time need to be formulated. (See II.2.5.2.)
- The internet can be a useful tool to link faith-based organizations. (See II.3.2.)
- It is necessary to integrate traditional and contemporary knowledge. (See II.3.3.)

#### III.2.2. For UNESCO

- A language able to reach the people should be preferred to technical jargon. (See I.3.1.)
- The term “sustainable development” is too abstract and unappealing to inspire people, and it is increasingly being regarded as an oxymoron. Expressions like “sustainable living” and

“sustainable life” seem much more adequate. (See I.3.2.)

- The DESD is not just about the environment, it's about social change and about transforming economic and political structures. It also should have an impact on institutions like the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. (See II.1.1.)
- Most of the damage to the Earth is done by 'believers' in the secular modern worldview, with its ingrained 'faith' in endless economic growth and consumerism. To expose this as a set of unsustainable and delusional beliefs should be a priority of the DESD. (See II.1.1 and II.3.4.)
- Fostering local knowledge and nurturing local cultures and languages is part and parcel of preserving the ecological integrity of a bioregion. (See II.2.3, II.2.3.1 and II.2.3.2.)
- Sustainability and environmental ethics must be place-based rather than universal: they should have diverse expressions according to the environmental context and the local culture, while keeping a strong sense of planetary awareness and kinship with other communities and other forms of life. (See II.2.3.2.)
- There is a need to collect success stories of education for sustainability.
- We need a new education, formal and non-formal, that fosters planetary awareness, caring for future generations, nurturing cultural diversity, expanding our ethical horizon and celebrating life. The UN should support the DESD with more financial resources.
- Education for sustainability should aim towards “a change of mind and heart”, changing who we are. (See II.2.3.3 and II.2.4.3.)
- Education for sustainability should stimulate awe and reverence for life (See II.2.5).
- Education for sustainability should implicitly convey renewed notions of “progress”, “prosperity”, “development”, “rights” and “happiness”. (See II.2.4 and II.2.4.1.)
- Non-formal education is easier, faster, and more adaptable than formal education. (See II.3.1.)
- The internet can be a useful tool to use in education for sustainability, especially when aimed at highly developed areas. (See II.3.2.)
- Education for sustainability must clearly distinguish between two very different target groups: the wealthy 20% of humanity and the poor 80%. (See II.3.4.)
- We should aim to learn from those who have been practicing sustainable lifestyles over the centuries. (See II.3.4.)

**UNESCOCAT —**  
**Centre UNESCO de Catalunya**

Mallorca, 285  
08037 Barcelona  
Tel: +34 934 589 595  
Fax: +34 934 575 851  
[centre@unesccat.org](mailto:centre@unesccat.org)  
[www.unescocat.org](http://www.unescocat.org)