

SUSTAINABLE CULTURES - CULTURES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Notes from the Tampere Dialogue I

Date: 16th May 2008, from 3.15 pm to 6.30 pm

Venue: Main public library Metso, Tampere, Finland

Participants: Marko Ulvila, Linda Wallgren, Jarna Pasanen, Thomas Wallgren, Tuuli Hirvilammi, Jhiko Manyika, Tere Vadén, Peter Kuria, Julius Muchemi, Hilikka Pietilä, Vijay Pratap, Anastasia Laitila, Anja-Riitta Ketokoski and Olli Tammilehto.

Proceedings

Project director **Marko Ulvila** opened the session by welcoming everybody. In his opening words he reminded that the the quest for the best ways of life has been a storyline in literature for hundreds, even thousands of years, for example in the Indian *Mahabharata* or Finnish *Seitsemän veljestä*. In a common version of the story the hero keeps travelling between the palace and the forest, trying to decide what kind of life practises would be the best. In the same spirit this research project wants to search and define good, sustainable ways of life. One aim of this project is to identify the existing sustainable cultures and then to learn from them.

In his initial presentation philosopher **Thomas Wallgren** stressed that the approach in the project concept note is a very important one: How to manage the transition from the modern practises to sustainable ones? What practises are there that help people to move from the harmful practises to sustainable ones?

He started by making two new definitions for the societies around the world.

- 1) Societies in Ecological Transition (SET) ie. the modern societies that have to transform themselves culturally
- 2) Societies in Ecological Balance (SEB) ie. traditional societies that do not use excessive amounts of energy or natural resources.

Wallgren presented three paradigms from which we can examine the transition: Market optimism, Social democratic paradigm and the Gandhian system. The market optimism is the dominant paradigm in the West at the moment. The social democratic paradigm does not consider the culture as transition, but as the result of development. The Gandhian paradigm, which is basically critique of technology, states that technology prevents the transition to sustainable societies and we should shift from technological cultural solutions. Wallgren wished that as a part of this project we should go to the Tolstoy archives and search the correspondence of Gandhi, Wittgenstein and Tolstoy and find inspiration from there.

Senior researcher and thinker **Hilikka Pietilä** started by noting that the whole human economy should be seen from the subsistence perspective where the household and cultivation economy are the basis of the human economy.

The household serves people instead of making use of them as workers and consumers as in industry-trade-business economy.

At the moment the terms of business economy is being imposed on the other two economies: household and cultivation, and this is very destructive. Households are becoming totally dependent of the market economy, ending up in something that can be called market slavery. The more dependent the households are on the market economy, the better for the market.

Pietilä noted that the problem is that business economy does not take ecology into consideration at all, where the households and cultivation do. This problem has become worse over the time. Trying to solve the present food crises with money and markets does not work - a more profound change in the structures is desperately needed. The structural adjustment policies turned agriculture towards cash crops production in stead of helping farming families to provide themselves with food. The profound change is needed in agriculture for long term improvement.

Pietilä stressed that these are the key issues when we talk about sustainability. How to make this total picture of human economy more sustainable? According to Pietilä, so far only feminist-ecological economics has the holistic approach to economics.

On his presentation free lance writer and researcher **Olli Tammilehto** examined capitalism. He maintained that capitalism is a power system rather than an economic system. If we want to find out what is capitalism today we need to examine the history of the 20th century. When the demands for universal suffrage were becoming impossible to turn down in the early 20th century, the capitalists and other elite circles got worried. They examined "how to take the risk out of democracy", to use the phrase of the time. To make the risks of democracy minimal, the modern propaganda was invented to manipulate people on subconscious level. There were other political innovations as well, such as the Volkswagen or people's car and the television, which contributed a lot in changing workers' life-style and dwelling patterns to more solitary and less communal ones.

Tammilehto stated that consumption is a political project, not an individual choice. The whole idea of consumption society is to make people dissatisfied, so they want to consume trying to satisfy themselves. Democracy in a consumption society is surrogate democracy.

After the 1960s and the emergence of ecological movement the capitalists faced a new task: how to take the risk out of ecology? One answer to this has been the market solution to climate change by Al Gore and his fellows: global market on greenhouse gasses! This quasi-solution gives a new legitimacy for consumption-capitalism but does not help in the global climatic emergency we are facing. Instead it delays the necessary revolutionary change in social structures.

Sirpa Tapaninen, a teacher of Alexander-technique, yoga instructor and a free lance researcher spoke on human body. She stated that modern people can use their brains effectively for all kinds of destructive activities, but not at all well for giving space for automatic posture and balance mechanisms of the body. This has lead to all kind of misuse of the body that is evident in the wide spread problems in body tensions, overweight etc.

Sirpa told how the founder of Alexander-technique, F.M. Alexander, stated that if you are a psychophysical entity, you would not use your body against another person, for example pull the trigger of a gun pointed at a human. We have lost the contact with our bodies, which can be both

harmful and dangerous. One result of this is the type 2 diabetes which is now threatening people all over the modernised world and which could easily be prevented by simply eating less and moving more. But for some reason we want to indulge ourselves. Yoga practice has become increasingly popular in the West, but focus is mainly on the physical exercises, not in the whole philosophy.

Indian activist researcher **Vijay Pratap** noted that it would be worthwhile to go through the documentation 200 years back and see what were the debates then on sustainable ways of life. How did the destruction of the ecologically sustainable ways of lives happen? What were the social and political discussions? Pratap also wondered what can be done in this project in its one year course with the vast range of topics that need to be covered.

Pratap commented on Pietilä's presentation on market economy. In India farmers facing problems have been committing suicides in big numbers. When this phenomenon has been looked at more carefully, it has been found out that it is those farmers that have owned something themselves and have been able to take loans and mortgages and then loose it all, have been the ones to take there lives. The prevailing system, the market mechanism is the thing that drives them to indignity.

On the discussion on the climate justice Pratap stated that the Southern elite does not think of its own people but the Southern and Northern elites are in collusion. Therefore the Indian elite is only worried securing their consumption and does not say anything about the 90% of the Indians who hardly burn fossil fuels at all. This is not only racist but inhumane.

Peter Kuria from Finland and Kenya said we should find out how the sustainable societies become unsustainable. The issue has been there since the societies have become sedentary. The modern societies desire for maximum efficiency and instant delivery is also a problem, that could be solved by people demanding less. Transition is part of human history. For example a community now living in the Mkongo forest near Mount Kenya used to be pastoralists with animals, but in a process of migration they lost all their livestock, thus settling in the forest as hunter-gatherers. Current advice for the communities like that is to become modernised and start cutting trees for market and purchase consumer goods. We should see what are the forces threatening more sustainable existence. To conclude, Kuria said that World Bank and others are saying on the one hand that climate change crates more poverty and on the other hand that climate change has become multi-billion industry. .

Tuuli Hirvilammi from Finland said that it is a good thing the discussion is not only on consumption but about a more profound transition. In this the social dimensions are very important, and understanding how our society has become socially unsustainable. Perhaps increasing consumption is a result of decreasing social relations in families and communities. Also the relation with the nature is important, and culturally sustainable society is a good theme to study. It is necessary to analyse how the societies have become unsustainable and have dialogues with cultures that are in a process of transition towards unsustainability. She pointed out the different social structures for example here in Finland and in India. When she was travelling in India and told people there she lives alone in Finland, they thought it was very weird. When I pointed out to them that is what our so called development has done, they got thinking about "development" from a bit different angle. Hirvilammi concluded that It would be good to have a clearer vision and a map of the future sustainable culture.

Julius Muchemi from Kenya said that it is good to look at the issue sustainability in various cultures, in the North and South, and what can their interaction be. When societies see that they have got lost and unsustainable, then it would be best to look back and see how the society was when it was more sustainable. But can the northern societies do this? Muchemi explained how his organisation works with local communities. Many of the problems present in the minority communities are caused by the dominant communities, and the solutions have to be for both of the groups. When we feel lost, then it is best to go back to the junction and try to take a right way from there. Traditional knowledge about sustainable management of ecosystems is still very strong in many communities. In this, the landscape is important to be understood and documented.

Jhikolabwino Manyika from Tanzania thanked all the speakers for many good thought. He explained how the members of the rasta community believe in natural way of living, and how the west is regarded a power of destruction (Babylon). The origins of rasta thought and lifestyle is among the African slaves brought to Caribbean islands, where the main thing was to relate with mother nature and father Jha. Over the time some rastas have decided run away from that system and moved from Jamaica or UK to Africa. But nowadays with the climate change there is no place to escape – even the ice cap of Kilimanjaro is melting. He suggested that people have to come together to solve the problems, because if the west continues the destruction, the whole world will be destroyed. In that, the natural way of living is most important.

Tere Vadén from Finland started by stating that there is consensus among the participants that the Western way of life has very bad track record regarding sustainability. Until today it has not produced a sustainable way of life whereas in other parts of the world there are sustainable communities and cultures. It is very good to make a clear difference between the sustainable and unsustainable cultures and their understanding and use of technology. For the west, the magnitude of the needed change is not dissimilar from some kind of religious rebirth: the change has to be of that size and kind. The challenge is that many people feel that technology delivers and brings improvements in life. He concluded that it would be interesting to look at the sustainable cultures and their interaction with the dominant cultures. For example the Saami of the Nordic Arctic have culturally survived the push of the dominant Finnish society. It is important to not that societies can give up technology, like happened in the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that sustainable culture can exist along non-sustainable one.

Anja-Riitta Ketokoski from Finland recalled that Agenda 21 has also a cultural dimension, but it is not noted much in Finland. Artists are good at speaking about life. She recalled how the topic of culture and sustainability was discussed in the Nordic conference a year ago and various ways of understanding sustainability were presented. For the project she suggested that it will be good to have dialogue among ordinary people, not only academically trained. The tendency is to move from culture as expressions to cultural industry as consumable commodities. The domination of homo economicus is a major challenge. We in the North need development aid from the South to become more sustainable.

A few comments on the discussions were made:

Hilkka Pietilä emphasised that one should have a priority order of different sustainabilities, and ecological should be the number one as it is the basis of our existence.

Olli Tammilehto commented on the individual bias of many of the presentations. This has come up especially regarding consumption and the idea that people now have to choose to consume differently. He sees that consumption is a political tool of those in power. The idea that people are

consuming to live better is contradicted by the fact that generating dissatisfaction to fuel consumption is the essential in modern capitalism. To think that individual is the key in consumption is very naive, the capitalist power structure and corporate manipulation are producing that kind of behaviour. Even though power elites now as always in history are resorting occasionally to conspiracies, in most cases this manipulation is done quite openly.

Marko Ulvila summarised some of the presentations by highlighting perspective presented by Thomas Wallgren about the transition of modern unsustainable societies. The common view of seeing modern, industrialised countries a natural models for the rest of the world has to be challenged, and the sustainable societies of the developing countries rather show the way. Marko Ulvila saw similarities in the presentations by Hilikka Pietilä and Sirpa Tapaninen where the dominance of the modern industrial market-economy is creating problems for the primary well being. In the case that Pietilä's presented, households and cultivation economy gets squeezed, in Tapaninen's the body is harmed. Furthermore, Ulvila fully agreed with Tammilehto on the importance of addressing capitalism and looking at the structural issues behind sustainability and unsustainability. For example the unsustainable consumerist culture should come as no surprise when comparing the 1.000 million euros spent annually in advertising in Finland with the 4 million spent in government information work on energy efficiency. In this light Marx and the way the ownership of the means of production are organised are important.

Notes by Jarna Pasanen & Marko Ulvila