United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

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Economic growth can be a mixed blessing. Where there is an excess supply of labor and little to no regulatory protection, people can be reduced to commodities. As a result, workers are exploited as evident in the prevalence of both poor working conditions and wages. These conditions compound poverty and result in subsistence living. This enables a vicious cycle, as familial poverty often prompts the entry of children into the workforce, compromising their development, education and enhancing their mortality and morbidity risk. Researchers at the University of Iowa, estimate that 41 percent of child mortality is due to the use of child labor in unsafe working conditions.

Economic growth has been measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which provides a value related to how much a country can produce at a given point in time with the resources that it has available. The underlying behavioral assumption has been that more is always better and that as a result the economically strongest countries produce the most, resulting in relatively high GDP and overtime relatively high GDP growth rates. Presently, there is a growing understanding that producing and consuming more is not a sustainable proposition. Interestingly in counter to the assumption that people desire to always have more, research shows that having more does not necessarily make people happier.

Today, we are at a global crossroad, we understand the adverse environmental impacts of production and consumption in terms of degradation, depletion, extinction, and enhanced speed of climate change. We know that what happens in one country impacts other countries. After all, we share the same atmospheres and oceans. We understand that exploitation of peoples, animals and the planet reduces our humanity and promotes the fulfillment of some nations and people over others.

Sustainable economic growth considers the resource constraints that we live with as a global community. However, it also incorporates what has not always been included in the past, the impact of human activities (anthropogenic) on the environment and global systems. Instead of human life being in dominion over the environment, sustainable economic development looks at the responsibility of humans to steward the environment for the present and the future. In this way, sustainability is about aligning what we value: clean air, clean water, healthy food, personally fulfilling lives, and strong communities with how we produce and consume.

This is not a new way of thinking, Indigenous cultures around the world have embedded sustainability as a way of life in their culture. In North America, the most well known is the 7th generation decision making process of the Iroquois.

Economic theory in the past 75 years has been reduced by many to only looking at maximizing short-term benefits or financial returns. In large measure the cultural norm of immediate gratification has been fueled by the application of these economic behavioral assumptions. From this perspective, including sustainability into the assessment of maximization requires a modification of the assumption of immediate gratification to an assumption that benefit is increased through long-term social and environmental welfare. This essentially equates to a cultural norm that values the present and future as well as both human and non-human elements.

Education is significant to fostering sustainable economic growth. If people understand why changes need to be made and even more importantly that the way we live today is based on behavioral assumptions that can no longer be justified based on the information we have, sustainable development can become the global culture.

Sustainable economic growth given that it considers the impacts of economic growth on planetary resources and the environment, promotes “fair” treatment, a concept that dates back to the establishment of modern economic thought and Adam Smith. Fair wages are living wages, which is one significant aspect of decent work. The United Nations defines decent work to include a safe non-exploitive working environment with enforced and represented worker rights.

If people are able to have decent work as defined by fulfilling jobs, paying a living wage that provides time for leisure, which is also a foundation for accessible education for children, there is a strong catalyst for developing and maintaining a culture of sustainability that actively promotes the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

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WHAT IS “DECENT WORK”?