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Human Ecology:
Home, Work and Society

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Human ecology: home, work and society
a summary of Dr. Mauri Ahlberg's paper

Many people are familiar with the definition for sustainability as stated in *Our Common Future*, commonly called The Brundtland Report: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'[1] As a biologist, I would argue that the best way to achieve this definition of sustainability is through sustainable use of biodiversity. While many people would not agree and would opt for ambitious recycling and energy saving policies, I claim that sustainable use of biodiversity is the core of achieving sustainable development. However, what was achieved by the Brundtland Committee and by this specific definition of sustainability was to make the idea of sustainable development popular. Furthermore, they brought the issue of 'needs' to the fore of the debate on sustainability. What I would like to argue in this paper is that sustainable use of biodiversity is rooted in an appreciation of real needs. I will use the interrelated nature of the natural environment as a framework for exploring the systemic needs of man as a social and psychological being.

I will begin with my viewpoint of biology as an integrating science. There are three mainstream approaches to biology at the moment: the atomistic approach, the holistic approach and my preferred approach, the systemic approach. This approach is based on scientific systems and I would also call it integrative. From the point of view of science, human beings are part of nature. It does not take much effort in observation, however, to notice that man is part of the biosphere and he is constantly transforming it. So there is a natural system, the biosphere, or more locally the ecosystem, that man is a part of. As social and political beings, however, humans are also part of smaller human systems such as society. It is through society that we are all interconnected, an idea which was first explored in Frigyes Karinthy's *Everything is Different*[2] and popularised by John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*[3]. Even though everybody is unique and different, our personal narratives are in many ways linked and the overarching link we all have is with the biosphere. It is therefore fitting, I think, to discuss human needs within the framework of the system, biological or otherwise, that man finds himself in.

From the framework of interconnected systems we move to needs and it is at this point that I would like to introduce the Aristotelian concept *eudemonia*. This term is sometimes vaguely translated as 'happiness' but 'human flourishing' would be a more precise definition. It is an idea that is supported by biological evidence. Every organism has needs and when these needs are met to the right degree, the organism flourishes. It is important to stress that it is not only that needs are met, but that they are met in the correct amount. We may think, for example, of a cactus that, like other plants, needs moisture, but a very small amount. If a cactus is given too much water it suffers the same consequences as a tropical plant that is not watered at all. The same analogy also applies

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[1] *Our Common Future* (1987), Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-282080-X

[2] Karinthy, Frigyes. *Chain-Links.* Translated from Hungarian and annotated by Adam Makkai and Enikö Jankó.

[3] Guare, John (1990). *Six Degrees of Separation: A Play* (First edition ed.). New York: Random House. ISBN 067940161X

to human beings. You can have too much affection, for example, so that you cease to feel anything. Human beings also flourish, achieve well-being and are happy in optimal conditions.

The problem with human beings, though, is that sometimes whims get confused with real needs. We could look to the world of fashion and trends for innumerable examples, but we can also think about other resources such as food, energy and space. It is important, then, that we know what our real needs are as human beings.

Within the constant framework of systems, it is undeniable that human beings form complex systems that enable them to achieve higher standards of well-being. We need organisations. For instance, when a person is born, there are usually experts within an organisation that help during the birthing process. Without organized society and its organizations modern life would be impossible. Small may be beautiful, but in real life many laws and regulations protects us from tyranny, unnecessary accidents, injuries and deaths. Society is full of organisations that provide empowerment by offering resources that answer an individual's needs. Schools and universities, for example, help meet our need to learn. Furthermore, humans have a need to use and develop skills within the context of their society. According to the empirical research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi[4], the people who are happiest are those who reach the highest of their capabilities, through the acquisition and use of knowledge and skills, and use them to serve the wider community. The most fulfilled person he claims to have found was a mechanic who worked in a very demanding environment but who served the whole local community.

Within society it is still possible to reduce our ecosystem further and it is here that we find the home. The home is interesting because it is the first point of contact between the individual and a social system. Thus, I believe that the most important aspect of the home is the people in them and the relationships between them. If we are considering the well-being of the individual, which then translates to the well-being of a society, the home is crucial. Nowadays there is plenty of research on emotions and they are extremely important for a meaningful life as well as for mental health. Care and love between spouses and between generations is very important. Having these kinds of relationships and emotions is fundamental for well-being, as positive psychology suggests. In positive psychology the person is encouraged repeatedly call to mind things about their life that make them happy. Personally, the thoughts that make me happy are those that relate to the person with whom I always feel 'at home'. Furthermore, I think this is a common human experience and we can observe it on its most basic level in babies. A baby does not have an understanding of what a physical home is or what it is to possess anything. However, they do have a sense of security and well-being which is based on their relationship to their mother. At the heart of this relationship is the love between the mother and the baby which is expressed by the care the mother gives the baby. Once again, this care is a type of service where skills are used and improved and where a person benefits. It is therefore linked back to social nature of human beings.

To conclude I would like to apply these arguments to the agreements reached in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and Johannesburg (2002). These two summits asserted that it is necessary to integrate ecological, economic and socially sustainable development to every aspect of life. I would make my own addition and say that it should also be integrated into our personal life, that is, in our

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[4] Gardner, Howard, Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, and Damon, William (2002). *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*. New York, Basic Books.

home and in our community. Human flourishing on its personal and social levels leads to an understanding and achievement of real needs which leads to sustainable use of biodiversity and sustainable development. Because the relationships in the home (the needs of the individual) link to society and the needs of the collective in turn link to the biosphere, achieving a sustainable lifestyle at home based on real needs is at the core of achieving sustainable development.