

Marketing Sustainable Development: Using Local Concepts for Attaining Global Efficiency

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I. Today's Solution for Tomorrow

The newly introduced concept of sustainable development is supposed to limit and rectify modern-day, global problems. An ordinary person might ask the following questions: What is sustainable development? What is education for sustainable development? Why is the subject so important? Why should anyone worry about preparing for tomorrow when we might not live long enough to see the results?

Sustainable development was first defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission¹ as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

One famous definition of the term “marketing” is “understanding the needs and wants of others and creating ideas, products, or services that fulfill those needs and wants.”² So what is the missing link between marketing and sustainable development? The answer is “needs”. By identifying populations’ different needs, sustainable development can be adapted and thereby made more efficient.

Eight Millennium Development Goals were created by the U.N. in 2000. 2015 was the year set for achieving these goals. Realistically, many of these goals will not be fully met by then. UN statistics do show that some of the Millennium Development Goals in certain regions are being met or closely met, but the least developed countries – those representing the poorest and weakest countries in the world – are lagging far behind other developing countries. Sub-Saharan Africa and South-Eastern Asia have not been able to catch up in terms of poverty, disease control and general health³.

Nonetheless, public awareness has improved considerably over the past decade. We can see more and more documentaries on sustainable development in the media. It is becoming a popular theme for managers and future managers, and there are more and more possibilities for students to study sustainable development. People have become aware that the issues of social inequality, the environment, poverty and health are important for us now and for our children tomorrow.

2. Realistic Goals?

The study of culture is as fascinating as it is essential when trying to determine a marketing strategy because it helps a marketer understand how people think, how they react to different ideas and situations, and how they live together as a group. Government, religion and social customs are areas of culture that have their distinct roles, but they are all intertwined, making them virtually inseparable.

Religion and superstition can have a severe negative impact on social behaviors, especially in terms of superstitions and traditional practices about sexuality, gender roles and everyday conduct. Examples

¹ The Brundtland report was commissioned by the UN World Commission on the Environment and Development.

² Kotler, Philip, *Principles of Marketing*, Fifth European Ed., 2008, p. 8

³ Millennium Development Goals: 2009 Progress Chart, unstats.un.org. Retrieved January 2010

include curing sexually transmitted diseases through sexual intercourse, enforcing the taboos of sexuality as being evil or “dirty”, inflicting physical violence on new spouses⁴, and practicing genital mutilation⁵. Some may argue that these traditions are more pronounced in poorer communities.

The physical and psychological effects that religious practices can inflict are incredible, resulting in desperate acts and severe trauma such as the abortion of unwanted pregnancies in unsanitary and illegal clinics, the spread of disease, social ostracism, childbirth hemorrhaging, and even death.

When discussing the influence of religion on politics and government leadership, examples are numerous: the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Vatican’s influence on contraception and abortion, the Darfur crisis, and swearing on the Bible in court hearings in the U.S.A. Religion equally influences business and trade, in ways such as not selling alcohol before noon on Sundays in the southern United States, and eliminating loan interest from banking in Arab nations. So, we can see that in more traditional societies, religion has a tendency to strongly influence people’s way of thinking, their daily activities and duties, and their values.

In the same way, however, social customs can actually sway religious, political and government actions. Churches will adapt their practices to satisfy their followers and bring in new ones. The evolution of people's desire for gender and racial equality has led to changes in government and legal systems.

Lastly, political and economic institutions can impact both society and religion, encouraging diverse freedoms or, on the contrary, provoking social unease and religious repression.

What is clear is that attempts to effect change in non-Western societies by the imposition of Western democratic ideas about government, civil society and social custom (whether through force, diplomacy or economic pressure) have often proven disruptive or ineffective.⁶

This is only in part due to failure to understand cultural differences, which are of course not the only differential elements between nations: there are other factors such as levels of poverty, civil unrest and armed conflict which impede the achievement of Millennium Development Goal 7 on sustainability. However, cultural differences are significant, and among these differences concepts of time and progress are particularly important.

Edward T. Hall, in his book *Understanding Cultural Differences* [1990], explains the different concepts of time in different cultural contexts. Circular, linear, monochronic, polychronic: different cultures see and use time differently: live and relive it (circular), have only one life to live (linear), accomplish one task at a time (monochronic), and take on several tasks at once (polychronic). Western and certain Asian cultures tend to use their time to prepare for the future. For many African tribes, time is simply lived, not expected.⁷ All these different concepts of time can be difficult to take into account when trying to implement sustainable development as a sign of progress. Not every culture has the same notion of or respect for progress; not every culture feels that their people should live differently from

⁴ “Au Tchad musulman, des coups de fouet comme cadeau de mariage”, *Courrier International* -hebdo n° 877 - 23 August 2007

⁵ “Fact of the week”, www.unicef.org, 28 April 2010. Retrieved May 2010. Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (i.e. excision) is still a widespread practice in 29 countries.

⁶ Muna, Bernard A., “The Challenge of Democracy in Africa: Establishing Democracy in Multi-ethnic and Multi-tribal societies”, www.unafas.org, 2006. Retrieved May 2010

⁷ “South Africa: Young People Introduced to Culture of Savings”, 23 July 2009, www.buanews.gov.za/. Retrieved June 2010

their ancestors⁸.

From a more economic point of view, not every community interprets time the same way simply because their government does not give them the opportunity to appreciate time and life the same way. People from developed countries have a life expectancy of several decades (an average of 77 years in high-income countries in 1996)⁹. In least developed countries, life expectancy is only a few decades (an average of 65 years in low and middle-income countries in 1996); people will commonly die from disease or unnatural causes resulting from warfare or civil unrest. Logically speaking, in a poverty-stricken or war-torn country, a person's priority would not be to save money for tomorrow but to survive today. If a person is worried about surviving today, why would he or she have any interest in topics such as sustainable development, which by definition is a long-term notion?

All these elements need to be considered before launching a global strategy like education for sustainable development.

3. Education for Sustainable Development: A Marketable Strategy

If we want governments, businesses, and organizations to invest time, effort and money in education for sustainable development, then it has to be made attractive to them. What can they get out of education for sustainable development? How will that make them more profitable or more powerful? The strategy is admittedly devious but rational. Companies, governments or any other economic entity will not fully back education for sustainable development if it does not give them something in return.

In order to determine needs and how to satisfy them, market segmentation is a technique that is commonly used. This is "the process of dividing a total market into subgroups of consumers, or potential consumers, who are similar in some way"¹⁰. The Millennium Development Goals that the world is trying to achieve are predicated on problems springing from economic, political and social troubles within nations. Therefore, the best way to segment the world market is by basing the segmentation process on these same troubles which have also been used by international organizations to determine the economic status of countries in the world market. This is why our segments can be divided into three main groups: least developed countries, developing countries (not least developed) and developed countries (including emerging markets). There are 49 least developed countries in the world, most of which are in Africa. Developing countries (those that are not least-developed) are countries in which most people have a lower standard of living with access to fewer goods and services than do most people in developed countries. Developed countries, according to former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, are those "that [allow] all [their] citizens to enjoy a free and healthy life in a safe environment". These different levels of economic development imply different needs to be satisfied and different solutions for those needs.

In developed countries, populations have no excuse but to promote sustainable development. They have all the necessary resources to do so. In France, local governments have made enormous investments in education for sustainable development. Examples include promoting education for sustainable development at trade shows, government employees explaining recycling and composting techniques door-to-door, and increasing trash collection fees. Also, many advertisements and documentaries have been made to encourage responsible consumerism (e.g. avoiding food products made with palm oil, buying in bulk to reduce packaging, and buying local products to

⁸ Nambala, Shekutaamba V. V, "Religion and Progress in an African Context", www.fortschritt-welweit.de. Retrieved May 2010

⁹ Soubbotina, Tatyana P.; Sheram, Katherine, *Beyond Economic Growth : Meeting the Challenges of Global Development*, p.43, The World Bank, 2000.

¹⁰ www.decisionanalyst.com/glossary/MGlossary.dai. Retrieved May 2010

support local businesses and reduce carbon emissions).

This constant awareness through the media and word of mouth has had an incredible impact on environmental sustainability.

Sustainable development can be considered as a trend. One of the main reasons why more and more companies are turning towards sustainable development strategies is because of brand image. Companies who practice sustainable development are seen as socially responsible. Consumers begin to respect this corporate responsibility and then become customers. It is a marketing trend. The problem with this is that trends are usually short-term. As a result, new ways need to be found to coax companies, governments and organizations into investing in sustainable development for short-term and especially for long-term benefits. Unfortunately, some of the negative aspects of sustainable development are that it is time-consuming and financially costly. Therefore, solutions need to be found to either financially help companies to become sustainable or invest in research in order to make environmental sustainability more affordable.

Developing countries, despite their lack of monetary resources, have the minimum infrastructure to promote sustainable activities, such as ecotourism that cater to visitors from developed countries. Governments and foreign companies can also encourage fair trade to support local producers, farmers, and craftsmen. Local companies could develop techniques and low-cost technology to help women carry out physical labor more easily and effectively, so that they would not be at risk of damaging their health in order to run a business or household¹¹.

Developing countries, given their intermediary status, have the economic power and stability to work hand in hand with each other and with developed nations.

Least developed countries need to worry about day-to-day survival. They need to concentrate on their own society, economy, and infrastructure. If developed countries are to help them make progress, more time should be spent training local doctors, technicians, farmers, producers, and entrepreneurs instead of simply putting money in the hands of corrupt governments. Other possible solutions include adapting modern technology to their needs; supplying them with technology that is not costly, that is simple to use, and that requires little energy; promoting basic, local, cheap and accessible health practices and hygiene; training local men and women to run small businesses; and promoting the growth of native crops as well as working with local researchers on biotechnology.

Families in least-developed countries cannot necessarily afford to eat much less in order to send their children to school. As a result children have to work long days in intolerable conditions in order for their and their parents' survival. Policies need to be developed in order to consolidate restrictions on child labor and improve access to education for all children.

Least developed countries need to be able to progress at their own rhythm and not necessarily at the pace enforced by free-trade markets.

How can women really contribute to sustainable development? As mentioned earlier, some cultures have a relatively archaic way of thinking when it comes to women. Nonetheless, if researchers proved to governments and companies that women could actually contribute to economic development, maybe the mindset would evolve, and women would be encouraged to get an education and start small businesses. The World Bank calls investing in women "smart economics". ExxonMobil calls it

¹¹ Whited, Melissa; Abraham, Minety; Fosse, Farah; and Spieldoch, Alexandra, "Gender, Health and Trade", International Gender and Trade Network Secretariat, August 2003, web.igt.org. Retrieved May 2010

"smart business"; this, coming from a multinational company, should make people think.¹²

According to the UN News Centre, "on a global scale, women cultivate more than half of all the food that is grown"¹³.

According to the European Women's Lobby, "women's contribution to the EU economy has accounted for a quarter of economic growth every year since 1995"¹⁴.

According to the European Commission, closing the gender gap "could result in double-digit economic growth as high as 40% in some [European] Member States"¹⁵.

According to the World Bank, "in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, it is estimated that agricultural activity could be raised by as much as 20 percent if agricultural inputs were more equally distributed between men and women."¹⁶

Women are important economic players and giving them the necessary education, training, and social recognition so that they can effectively contribute to economic and social growth and stability is one of the keys of successfully marketing and implementing social equality and sustainable development.

Despite these facts, even developed countries are not playing their part. They need to set the example, but women in some of the leading countries in the world still earn on average 30% less than their male counterparts. All countries need to understand and be taught, through accurate cultural interpretation, that women can remain feminine and contribute to the well-being and development of a tribe or a nation through education and economic intervention.

The balance of nature is a notion that can be applied to almost anything in existence, including trade. The intrinsic qualities of capitalism and free trade are not necessarily bad. If anything has occurred from globalization, it is that the world has become aware of the different products and services available, people have become more sensitive to other cultures and business owners have realized that opportunities do not simply stop at the border. On the other hand, too much of a good thing can turn bad. Excess, or insufficiency, of anything in life is bad. Too much drinking will eventually kill you. Eating too much leads to obesity. Over-exploiting resources destroys them. Finding a balance is what will ensure sustainability, and we need to find ways to teach this to all populations of all countries: respecting natural resources without depriving the market, supporting local businesses as much as the multinationals, avoiding wasteful practices, and establishing equality between genders.

The problems in the world will not be cured and the Millennium Development Goals will not be achieved with a few simple words. Hopefully, these words will nonetheless encourage active players to see the world differently, and to develop strategies for people's needs and not necessarily for what we think are their needs.

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¹² "Investing in Women to Advance Economic Growth", 24 June 2009, www.cedpa.org/content/news/detail/2230. Retrieved May 2010

¹³ "Rural women key to economic growth, says UN official", 23 March 2010, www.un.org. Retrieved May 2010

¹⁴ "The 2020 Strategy – Growth and Jobs for Whom, Exactly?", European Women's Lobby, March 2010, ewl.horus.be. Retrieved May 2010

¹⁵ Idem

¹⁶ "Gender Equality Focus of Berlin Conference", 22 February 2007, www.worldbank.org. Retrieved May 2010

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