

Culture, environment and climate change

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Culture and environment are two topics that have received the attention of scientists, journalists and activists of all political colours. Both issues were discussed in several international forums. But a joint approach of both is needed, showing their interactions and, eventually, treating them together.

I have been trying for a long time to analyse the connections and, above all, to verify joint actions that can be beneficial or harmful for both subjects. During these reflections, I received an invitation to participate in this book that would deal with issues that are dear to my friend Dirk Messner. Fantastic proposal that would allow me to treat the subject in connection with the personality and work of Dirk. I have known him for a long time and I became linked to him through the activity of two of the centres that carry his influence: the German Development Institute (DIE) in Bonn and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research, in Duisburg. I think it was at dinner, in the Bonn restaurant where Beethoven was said to be a customer, when I met Dirk that spoke to me about the still unspecified subject of the Centre in Duisburg. Since then, I was illuminated by his intense work, his vocation for science and its application to practice, his ability to institutionalise concerns that deserve deep research but that require practical action – all this in a climate of sympathy, simplicity and deep dedication.

In the book he published with Silke Weinlich, the authors tell us that

“Changed perspectives and a reinterpretation and remapping of the world are required to overcome the centuries-old models of power games, from hegemony and dominance, even war, as normal states of intergovernmental behaviour [...]. Such changes in perspective could represent starting points for a global culture of cooperation to address competition and conflicts, to possibly overcome wars, and to create

cognitive, emotional and normative foundations to stabilize the global commons” (Messner & Weinlich 2016: 34).

Environment and climate change is one of the issues I want to speak about. Several meetings and documents were signed since the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, known as the *Earth Summit*, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. 117 heads of state and government decided to set forth global measures to protect the planet’s environment while guaranteeing sustainable economic growth. The conference created the Commission on Sustainable Development, which had a mandate to monitor international treaties on the environment, provide policy direction and coordinate action within the United Nations system.

In addition, the ‘Framework Convention on Climate Change’, which set guidelines for regulating emissions of atmospheric gases that cause global warming, was signed by 153 nations; and the ‘Biodiversity Convention’, which committed signatory nations to the protection of endangered species and cooperation on genetic and biological technology, was signed by representatives of 150 countries. Two other documents were adopted at the Earth Summit: the ‘Statement on Forest Principles’, recommending the preservation of world forests and the monitoring of development measures’ impact on timberlands; and the ‘Declaration on Environment and Development’, a statement of principles that emphasised the coordination of economic and environmental concerns.

The optimistic view of all that activity was summed up by UNCED secretary-general, Canadian Maurice Strong: “The Earth Summit must establish a whole new basis for relations between rich and poor, North and South, including a concerted attack on poverty as a central priority for the 21st Century. We owe at least this much to future generations, from whom we have borrowed a fragile planet called Earth.”

At the ‘Earth Summit+5’ meeting held in June 1997 in New York City, the objectives were to revitalise and energise commitments to sustainable development, to recognise failures and identify their causes, to recognise achievements, to define priorities for the post-1997 period and to raise the profile of issues addressed insufficiently by the Rio Summit. In addition, attendees called for greater cooperation and adherence among intergovernmental organisations and developed a programme of work for the Commission on Sustainable Development for the years 1998–2002.

Twenty years after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) produced a document containing steps for the implementation of sustainable development. At the Conference, Member States decided to launch a pro-

cess to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Conference also established guidelines on green economy policies and put in place a strategy for financing sustainable development. Governments adopted a 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns.

In April 2016, the Climate Change Summit COP 21 adopted the ‘Paris Agreement’, an international treaty on climate change signed by 175 countries in Paris, on 12 December 2015. Its goal is to limit global warming to well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels. Afterwards, 20 other countries signed the agreement.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded in 2017 that it is “unequivocal that global warming is occurring; the probability that this is caused by natural climatic processes is less than 5%; and the probability that this is caused by human emissions of greenhouse gases is over 90%”. But in August 2021, the IPCC delivered a new report warning that countries have delayed reducing their fossil fuel emissions so much that it is no longer possible to prevent global warming from further intensifying for the next 30 years. The report urges a coordinated effort among countries to stop emitting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by 2050. To achieve this, a rapid abandonment of fossil fuels is needed, as well as a radical decision on the part of different industries to remove greenhouse gases from the air. If this were achieved, the increase in global warming would stop and remain stable around 1.5°C, says the report.

If this effort is not made, however, the IPCC states that the global temperature could rise from 2 to 3°C or even reach 4°C. The report is clear in describing how each additional degree implies more intense catastrophic consequences: heat waves, worse droughts, floods, rising seas and acidification of the oceans. In conclusion, we can affirm that 30 years of declarations and efforts aimed at preventing a global catastrophe have been useless. Little has been achieved.

Let us, then, analyse these failures and losses in the light of the idea of culture. We speak here of culture in its anthropological sense, that is, of the systematic set of values, beliefs, traditions, behaviours and norms that give identity to a specific society (Saravia 2016: 296). Or, as defined by the Ministry of Culture of Colombia, through the General Law of Culture, “the set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional traits that characterise human groups and that includes, in addition to the arts and letters, ways of life, human rights, value systems, traditions and

beliefs” (Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia 1997). In German, ‘Kultur’ and not ‘Bildung’.

When confronting this concept with the practice of the provisions on environmental protection and global warming, we perceive that this idea is one of the greatest obstacles to observing them in practice. To explain this perception, I will mention several cases that I experienced, as a consultant, in my work in Brazil.

- In 1999 I participated in a project of the United Nations and the Brazilian government, destined to establish the bases of the environmental policies of the states of the Central West region of Brazil (Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Rondônia, Federal District and Goiás). The activity was carried out with the participation of the pertinent secretaries of State: Agriculture, Industry, Environment, among others, and the police of each one of these federative units. From this dialogue it emerged that the affected populations maintained customs and habits, or generated other behaviours, contrary or unrelated to environmental protection. The police, especially, reported the difficulties in enforcing the law when they contradicted traditional habits or faced phenomena such as drug trafficking, killing and smuggling of protected animals etc., in addition to the difficulties of patrolling such large and difficult areas.
- For many decades, clearing and deforestation was seen as a beneficial activity. Some states gave an award, the ‘medal to the pioneer’, which rewarded the destruction of native forest areas to plant coffee or other crops destined for agribusiness. In the decades before 1980, devastation was considered a symbol of progress. Those who tried to defend trees or animals were seen as romantic or naïve.
- As some technicians of EMBRAPA (Brazilian Agricultural Research Company), a public institution of extreme importance to deal with agriculture in tropical areas, have reported, their indications and advice given to farmers were listened to but never applied to their crops. As the farmers stated, “we have always done it that way, and those urban technicians do not know what is best for these lands.”
- On the northern border of the State of Mato Grosso, I verified that the small farmers who received parcels of land in compliance with the directives of the Agrarian Reform used archaic and unsuited methods for their activity. In addition, they did not receive aid or subsidies for the purchase of seeds or fertilisers, so the lands were eroded in periods of around five years. Consequently, they abandoned the acquired lands and migrated north, contributing to deforestation in the Amazon. The

operation was repeated years later. This activity carried out by hundreds of farmers was advancing on protected areas. On the other hand, forest clearing aggravated the pests of insects carrying diseases such as Chagas disease, schistosomiasis, elephantiasis etc., which affected farmers and their families.

- In the north of the State of Paraná, indigenous lands were demarcated. As the indigenous peoples neither received agricultural extension services nor other support, they resorted to cutting down araucaria forests (a typical forest species of that region) and selling the wood as a source of income. In addition, they installed a toll system for the roads that cross the demarcated area.
- The burning of fields is an ancestral practice, destined to burn the remains of crops and prepare the ground for new crops. This is done in times of drought. The air in cities and airports of the region is, during that time, polluted by smoke from these activities.
- The existence of deposits of gold and precious stones led to the arrival to the Brazilian North region of thousands of ‘gold seekers’ (called *garimpeiros* in Portuguese). The search for, and extraction of, minerals was carried out in a savage and irrational way: use of mercury that contaminated the waters, fish and *garimpeiros*, destruction of the ciliary forests of the rivers, contamination of the waters and destruction of the navigable routes, violence against Amazonian peoples etc. It was advised to use the possibilities of credit and bank deposits to instil appropriate techniques and technologies. It was, in general, an attempt to modify practices to reduce or eliminate pollution or destruction of the environment. Overall, the idea was successful. In a few years, the damages diminished and the exploitation became more rational.

In conclusion, all these resistances and practices show the clash between traditional habits and the needs of environmental protection. As Messner and Weinlich point out, “Humans are creatures of habit who are reluctant, not least in real time to part from their internalized routines” (Messner & Weinlich 2016: 34).

These cases, and many more could be cited, show how traditional culture and habits could be an obstacle to preventing the destruction of the environment and finding ways to reduce global warming. The prescriptions contained in the treaties and documents above mentioned are very theoretical in front of a very alive and active reality. It is possible to affirm that the language and the formal treatment of the agreements are not understood and are very distant from a very rich, very dynamic and very destructive reality. Thus, the challenge is to find ways to modify or take

advantage of culture with intelligence, knowledge of reality and effective formulae that facilitate the application of environmental protection regulations.

References

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