Sustainability, Ethics and Education

Editorial by **I. HAAZ**

Sustainability concerns and the long-time scale

Biodiversity is condition for life on earth, this is the key assumption of the nice metaphor: "the man is sewn with biodiversity", by French biologist Marc André Selosse (Selosse, 2026). Transformation of natural environment induced by excessive extraction (as overfishing), chemical pollution, destruction of forests, leads to mass extinctions of natural species (bees, earthworms), caused by human activity, which confirms the invasive nature of large mammals such as we are, considered as *homo natura*, more precisely as homo sapiens.

This view confirms and dives deeper into the narrative of a global impact on climate from 200 years of industrial development and feeds the concern about the environment.

The invasive nature of homo sapiens is documented by palaeoanthropologists (Jean-Jacque Hubelin, 2025), based on the study of earth history and the evolution of life on earth, claiming that humans gradually become ecological predators, while developing the brain as the main instrument of survival.

Large, mobile mammals (mammoths, elephants, homo sapiens) periodically become dominant ecosystem engineers, but dominance is temporary and dependent on environmental change and chance. The claim, that we are no longer in the Holocene — we are in the Anthropocene, could be seen as a logical consequence, in fact homo sapiens could be seen as a global ecosystem engineer for millennia, following a palaeoclimatological optic (Ruddiman, 2005), which sees in the technics and survival strategies of farmers and livestock breeders over hunters and gatherers, reasons of accelerated changes over the environment, around 8'000-10'000 years ago, an ongoing transformation of the environment (Crutzen & Steffen, 2003).

Natural as socially constructed "integration"

A possible consequence of such naturalized explanations is the projection of our actual problems such as overconsumption and impact on the biosphere over prehistoric and distant selective processes, solar or volcanic activity, and we may be inclined to revise our responsibility and need for engagement based on causal factors.

Considered as socio-economic levels of reality, sustainability, ethics and education entail, first, focusing on the first term, a holistic view on three different aspects of the reality: 1) socio-political, 2) economic and 3) ecological spheres, which, need to be defined via integration. The problem is that all three aspects combined, form a *weak concept of sustainability*, because there is *no one prima facie correct and defined* elaboration on the process for integration.

This is the main difficulty, it is an axiological challenge of defining a hierarchy of values, where socio-economic and cultural conditions and our responsibility and care for the planet may be partly conditioning our image of how we conceive integration of all 1)-3).

Balancing all three, prioritizing one or two over the others, these appear possible options. When economic aspects of reality are commanded by concrete needs and benefit/cost analysis, roughly a principle of utility is at work, a concept which could help us to frame the two other terms the socio-political and the ecological more precisely. The biosphere defined as part of a natural law opens value systems that are well beyond cost-benefit analysis in visions gathered from ecotheology across religious traditions, in deep religious understandings and human engagements.

History often is called for providing precedent similar situation, in this case history does not give any comparable and probing facts. Values-driven decision-making may precisely enter as particularly crucial, as decision-making and leadership is what brings an additional ethical normative layer to the simple utilitarian calculus. Agenda-setting models recently focus on an analysis of the influence relationships between journalists and political sources on issues of sustainability. When there is no playbook, we usually rely on what is left, human qualities and healthy habits, which are also largely conditioned by cultural and religious community codes and principles.

The awareness of the importance of sustainability, is seen as part of a complex world, where we already witness technological acceleration and geopolitical fragmentation, and it is seen as a new mode of being aware of our interdependencies, correlated with these factors.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework

The UN SDG framework, which once served as benchmark for collective engagement, is seen today as "weak" because of the lack of any precise integration of the three aspects entailed in the whole concept of sustainability, which is:

"The approach of the Commission [the World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, 16] (and the United Nations) operates with a weak notion of sustainability, assuming that the socio-political, economic and ecological spheres are separate, having their own logic and values, but nonetheless the expectation is that they can be integrated." (ten Have/ Gordijn, 2020). Is the weakness at stake a criticism about what stands for the Commission, perhaps instead of a doubt on the importance of articulating concerns from socio-political, economic and ecological horizons? This question would bring us to question the subject and the method not as much the object, or the distinct fields concerned.

Are panels of experts on climate deregulation, a consensus-based process at various stages of understanding and implementing sustainability sensitive rules and actions correct, because education may well be considered as a fundamental prosocial ethos, across cultures? Mathematical competency may still be needed, when complex statistical qualifications are at work in explaining and mitigating concrete risks.

Recent work by business ethicist from Corvinus University show promising dialogue between spirituality and the best practice based economic governance model. It is argued that because meeting most urgent economic needs could be done within the framework of collective action models, such as concretely experienced in SMEs, we could avoid the level of waste production of contemporary unsustainable arrangements of limitless economic growth, by focusing not on ideals and utopia but on the workplace, where we all spend a large part of our life (Veress, 2025). On the principle active participation or simply remaining agnostic about the environment seem two very different positions; we'll come to this later, for the moment a very simple observation could be made.

Collective action means leaders only participate to the quality of a collective human engagement, but they are not the cause of it. On the bottom line we could say with Saint-Exupéry: "A civilization is built on what is demanded of people, not on what is provided to them." (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Citadelle*, 1948)

Burden sharing justice: Limits of the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP)

Taking principles and norms seriously imply revisiting classical concepts such as the No-Harm Principle or the Distributive Justice principle and applying them to ecological risks and their costs.

Prohibition of "harm to others" (J. Feinberg, 1987) and the reflexive function of natural law or natural law understood as 'law of law' (F.-P. Piguet, 2016, 2018), can be combined to expose a perspective on how to think about legal experience in different interpretative frameworks, theorising law as a rule of good practice from above.

Distributive justice, for example, seems a limited paradigm for conceiving an environment where transformations occur that expose others to harm that is not directly related to the actions of others, as does the framework of Lockean natural law, where a scheme of cooperation allows costs and benefits to be exchanged in a transactional manner. E.g. simply paying compensation for polluting (PPP) the environment seems running an error of category. Burden sharing justice instead of PPP, entails a focus on the actors who could pay, and those who benefited from the emissions. Taking this half-transactional perspective, brings forward the specific national and regional development priorities, objectives and circumstances, and add a kind of "burden sharing justice" (Piguet, ibid.).

Courage, virtue and responsible action

On the other side, agnostic perspectives, which refuse the notion of natural law, applied on environmental issues, entails critical views on the sort of truth and procedure proposed by the UN and the World Commission, essentially collective action processes, which could be seen as using a Trojan horse – the unquestionable need for healthy environment- to impose all sorts of (more questionable) social control mechanisms. What if it is those who govern the less who govern the best, because individual freedom has a price which also needs to be acknowledged?

Preventing excessive and illegitimate control of the private life is certainly as important as not hiding our responsibilities, as being reliable part of collaborative processes, and bringing personal commitments and actions well beyond minimalistic expectations.

This brings us to the question beyond defining risks, threats or harms of the policy we engage in provided a narrower strategic focus. Politically libertarian and conservative voices may converge in showing that experts in risk management are needed to define possible harms. If political leaders consider economic growth and social development as priority, not because there is a lack of just and legitimate concern about the environment, but because over time we need to balance different priorities and economic growth is a legitimate aim, then environmental burden sharing needs to be considered.

Leaving for instance to algorithms large part of the processes, involved in the calculation of risks, caring for equitable insurance coverage, - as most private firms collect more data from very diverse sources, shows in a crucial manner, how far ethics should be considered as change maker of technology, because automated processes need human supervision and competency (Foo, 2019, 65-67). Without appropriate human wisdom, and if automated processes are just accelerators of given practical precepts, that are proto conventions understood as empty shells. As Montesquieu already pointed out: No tyranny is more cruel than the one practiced in the shadow of the laws and under *color of justice* — when, so to speak, one proceeds to drown the unfortunate on the very plank by which they had saved themselves." (Montesquieu, *Reflections on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans*, 1734, Ch. 16; our italic).

"Imitate the sculptor, perfecting his work by diminishing his material, rather than the painter, who continually adds to it": the virtue of sufficiency

We find in Christian ethics by S. Francis de Sales a critique of unsustainable attitudes, which are compared to the art of the painter, adding layers on layers having the presumption of adding quality to the work, when quality is perhaps on the contrary *in removing what is unnecessary*: "True Christian wisdom must be infinitely small in its own eyes, whereas the heathen philosopher would have his wise man look down upon everything, counting himself as the creator of his own prosperity, and this is intolerable vanity." (152); "by the world's standard, we shall never be rich. He who wants to be really rich should imitate the sculptor, perfecting his work by diminishing his material, rather than the painter, who continually adds to it." (*Spirit of S. Francis de Sales* by Jean Pierre Camus, Transl. by Sidney Lears, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1921, 149).

Future generations (first imbroglio): reducing war's ecological impact by advancing/ advocating for sustainable peace

In fact, if we look at examples of innovative technologies, the very idea of setting aside a finding, such as keep stocks of candle wax to protect future generations from a possible shortage of lighting may appear absurd, as a French mathematician recently wrote with wit (Beauzamy, 2025, 11). As Beauzamy ironically shows, the discovery of electricity would not have been possible without ignoring such a principle of economy and concern for future generations. "The discovery of the motor car would not have been possible if we had limited ourselves to breeding horses for future generations" [our transl.]

Indirect strategies for the environment: Geopolitical tensions, wars, may appear as related to economic priorities but wars have heavy ecological impact.

In setting up efforts for bringing sustainable peace, even without any ecological programme on the desk, would strongly benefit the environment and would deserve to be seen as addressing concrete harm prevention, that entails burden sharing justice, but where transitional justice processes would meet environmental concerns.

Michael Heumann shows that sustainable economic management of particular elements of a strategy of security, might bring all sorts of very important ethical questions, once we investigate it seriously: "zu den Sachen selbst", as would the German philosopher and logician E. Husserl say. Heumann warns that:

"Military equipment can be painted green and presented in a morally appealing light: there's no doubt about that – and yet it remains a question of ethics! However, (sustainable) investment ethicists are also called upon to fundamentally examine the relationship between military equipment and ethics, regardless of moral trends and the spirit of the times, and in doing so not to take their own assumptions for granted. In ethics, it is not assumptions that count, but sound arguments" (Heumann, 2026). German Banking Association (DK) has initiated a U-turn, as shows Heumann (2024), coinciding with the political 'turning point' initiated in 2022, claiming necessity is reason, but in contradiction with general principles of sustainable management of these resources. Peace, sustainability, armaments and *peacewashing* are all important, they are different categories and aspects of a reality, where although "it is generally accepted that [not only democratic] states have the right to use armed force to safeguard national security and secure peace" there should always be good and plausible reasons for turning around a long-term strategy, not simply adjusting to the development of a political bellicose ambiance. There are e. g. "a number of weapons that cause disproportionate harm and remain a threat long after a conflict has been resolved" (Swiss Sustainable Finance, 2017). The long-term harm or risk using such weapons would be considered as engaging in unsustainable ways of conducting military operations, but trading or financing such material would already entail different moral and legal stains, that deserve

serious ethical analysis. The economic activities around the armament industry brings for this reason compliance risks and/or ethical risks, even before considerations on how these tools are engaged [or fail to be engaged] during war.

The precautionary principle (second imbroglio)

A precautionary principle often associated with the principle of sustainability is probably responsible for a considerable scientific and technical disengagement, according to Beauzamy (op. cite).

Following Beauzamy's line of thought, instead of being built on a consensus of experts, "knowledge advances through debate", because every truth is subject throughout the history of ideas to "continual struggle" and "disagreement", while "consensus is formed around errors and lies" (Beauzamy, op. cite).

This line of questioning the political nature of our decisions, which would escape sound reasoning, and passively accept all sorts of arrangements, if it serves social survival, should not be underestimated, and raises again the *importance of ethics*, not only in complex times but even more in overly and artificially simplified environments.

It is perhaps not a surprise to find, in the critical analysis (ten Have, 2020), that "The Commission's notion of sustainability is also *strongly anthropocentric* [our italic]; human beings and their needs are the point of departure. Everything in nature has instrumental value and contributes to achieving human purposes. Others argue that this will not do."

Distinguishing a sociology of knowledge from the causal framework of knowledge itself, could contribute answering the objection to consensus-based knowledge or how far the reference to experts is overlapping reference to competency and method (Jorm, viii, 2025). It seems that even groups of people with imperfect expertise could make valid judgments and therefor group decision-making should have a particular place, comparted to traditional hierarchy of evidence and evidence-based practices (Surowiecki, 2004). That's for a trivial sociology of knowledge formation.

Nontrivial formation of our experience about climate change is different: "On the one hand, climate scientists seemed to overwhelmingly believe that the climate is rapidly warming, and that human activity is the major contributor. On the other hand, there were some dissenting voices, and a common objection was that the consensus of climate scientists is not a good basis for determining the truth." (Jorm, vii, 2025). For Beauzamy, serious education should aim at solid evidence-based science and the constitution of "Islands of stability", not consensus-based agreements, following Planck and Heisenberg's examples in 1933, when both refused to work for Hitler, and to offer him the atomic weapon (op. cite. 161, "Things to Do"). They did not want either to emigrate from Nazi Germany; Beauzamy advocates, in similar situation, to work under pression in a kind of Nietzschean *agon*. Refusing to contribute to the war efforts in 1933 was not so simple. It was like working in a kind of disagreement Feuerbach thought essential for the social structure of the experience: as the material conditions for revealing truth often is paved by social class struggles and human economic needs.

Disagreement, equilibrium and consensus

What about conflicting statements about scientific consensus, can they "only" "contribute to increasing scepticism about consensus process in general" (Jorm, op. cite, 4), or isn't it precisely not with Feuerbach disagreement as distinct from consensus, which grants favourable climate for research and the unveiling of some scientific finding? But if this is the case, pointing at scientific discipline instead of cooperative work, or social engagement,

could be seen as cross benefiting from both bottom up (social and economic work environment) and top-down dynamics (scientific and executive leadership).

One way of understanding why consensus may fail is to see dissenting groups promoting their own consensus. On the contrary, consensus and dissenting groups of experts may be considered as two sides of a same coin, in kind of *reflective equilibrium*, provided we may accept an *as-if* type of fiction of agreement, as part of a learning strategy, a kind of laboratory for building awareness to sustainability related matters, based on a dialectical process including conflicting narratives – understood with calm and wisdom.

Public concern or buzz?

It seems important to define the role of public interest on a given matter, since a necessary condition for troubles around new theories and practices is related to the reception in the *public arena* of general relevance for the crowd. No discussion and disagreement on complex mathematical statistical calculi since distrust of experts, entails awareness of contradictory evidence of some sort. When the path of constructing the conclusions is *narrow* and difficult intellectually to grasp, or when it is hard to evaluate the subject matter because of missing premisses, weighing up the pro and cons of different courses of action renders the task of expressing a view, and even more a criticism, morally humbling.

Focusing on personal liberty and parental rights may obscure the way we look at the power of a vaccine or how likely we may give our approbation to be exposed to GM crops. As rightly pointed out by Jorn in his work (Jorn, 2025), public interest related themes are more likely to produce wide disagreement, or a kind of *buzz*, since there is a *wide* legitimate concern:

-Public interest on conclusions of the IPCC and the optic of human activity as dominant cause of climate deregulation

-Public interest on the safety of food produced from genetically modified (GM) crops

-Public interest is vaccination of infants and children. (Jorm, ibid., 4)

On the level of thinking and clarity, level of evidence-based research positions a clear hierarchy of modes of epistemic discovery of data and formation of knowledge and communication.

Systematic review of randomized controlled trials (RCT) as highest level. Second level: experimental & fully scientific; a quasi-experimental level when pre-test and post-test design elements are not fully at RCT level. Last level is consensus-based methods, which place expert opinion and bench research at the bottom of the hierarchy of the levels of evidence and grades of recommendation. (Joanna Briggs Institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation Working Party October 2013).

Typology of consensus related practices in research and education

There are many ways of using or not using consensus: 1) to generate ideas and set priorities, 2) to assess funding applications and access to resources, and in implementing a research project, 3) in publishing findings, 4) in reviewing literature, 5) for conclusion of facts, 6) in dealing with multiple uses of expert consensus in one project. Consensus to establish scientific truths: position by historians, philosophers and sociologists of science a) positive, conditionally positive and negative positions.

b) Spontaneous and deliberative processes to reach consensus. The relative value of consensus and dissensus “Towards a wisdom of scientific crowds”: where expertise is balanced with cognitive diversity and the opportunity for sharing and building on

crossdisciplinarity, and this including at the workplace, not only aimed at professional researchers and professors. (Jorm, op. cit)

Perhaps a way of showing that experts constitute a real core group in science and education, but also in the business sector, means pointing at a factual reality, which does not preclude on the quality of the outcomes of such processes, - their consensual (or not) mode of process, only on specific attribute of collaboration around scientific tasks, conducted by experts and based on four claims on who is an “expert”.

As Jorm (op. cit) shows: “There are a number of attributes that have been used to specify who is a scientific expert, including professional qualifications and work experience, membership of scientific or professional organizations, peer-reviewed publications, specialist conference attendance and nomination by other experts. A common factor across these attributes is acknowledgement of expertise by peers.” (Jorm, A. 2025).

Research based on robust epistemic quality on public matter of concern

Since 1990, driven by experimental sciences (medicine) and their commitment to evidence-based approaches, top-down approaches trumped largely consensus-based approaches, relegating them to the bottom of the hierarchy of method of scientific truth-making. Double-blind peer review processes, still dominant in "hard sciences" reflects this tendency, where randomized control is regarded as far more honest way of checking quality, than reaching an agreement across the board by expert committees. What about the field of sustainability research and practices, and how does this area connect to the needs of the education sector? We propose first to acknowledge possible conflicts between both scientific and leadership or governance because they respond to two high levels of decision-making and two levels of stakeholder engagement (scientific and governance perimeters).

Research institutions as organisations

Education institutions as other organizations should test legitimacy, defensibility and alignment with values and obligations. Sustainability is among the long-term values & resilience options of governance. In order to transform capability instead of merely protect reputation, each institution needs to assess on regular basis not only the traditional short- and medium-term lenses as a) legitimacy & fairness, b) duties & obligations, c) value & identity or institutional integrity but as well d) long-term value & resilience.

In a more concrete manner, higher education institutions need to conduct action covering the assessment of industry – or more generally wider societal needs and inform students and university staff. Following some efforts done in this direction: “Companies expressed primarily two needs regarding sustainability skills: (1) sustainability professionals/specialists are needed and, (2) there is an equal need for all managers and leaders to have a general and basic competence regarding sustainable development within a number of different areas.” (Finnveden; Schneider, 2023). The second type of skills – covering a generalist type of knowledge - being more difficult to gather and have an enduring integration of those skills on the long term.

The reputational risk of green washing

Inherent to the concept of voluntary doing good is the risk of doing “as if”, which as we have seen above is partially part of the notion of building on consensus part of the process of an integrative and inclusive approach on socially sensitive matters. There should be a red line between on the one side creating stakeholder partnerships toward facilitating the *systemic change* necessary to achieve as many as possible of the SDGs (van Zanten & van Tulder, 2021), and the alternative negative attitude and unfortunate response for an institution which

would be *to greenwash and disclose untruthful or misleading positive information* (James W. Westerman, Yalcin Acikgoz, Lubna Nafees, Jennifer Westerman, 2022).

Top-down and bottom-up balance

Ten Have building on Hattingh argues that:

"A stronger notion of sustainability will be necessary that requires a drastic change in patterns of production and consumption, and that respects the intrinsic value of nature, regardless of any benefits for humans". It assumes that the socio-political and economic spheres are not separate from the ecological one but embedded in it (Hattingh, 2006, Ten Have, 2020; Piguet, 2018).

Not separated but mutually reinforcing public good, that is the promise, but what does that exactly entail in the concrete activities of the three layers of our previously introduced integrated approach?

In order to define who is impacted, including among employees, collective ownership should be emphasized but unequal decision rights, courageous leadership are key conditions on the executive director level, to prevent ethical risk issues, for sustainable governance, and to ensure the best chances to have strategic (legal, reputational, operational, HR, etc.) impact.

Epistemic relevance and quality: not merely to teach

Sustainability is not about teaching and writing narratives it is about ways of cultivating sustainable citizens, institutions, and economies. Adaptation to specific geographical contexts may bring very different results, therefore experts are needed to assess pragmatically the right balance. E. g. the use of the so-called "Delphi method", a structured communication technique, or method, developed as a systematic, interactive forecasting, can help assessing expert consensus, and could be an important mode of process in defining given a set of experts.

It could be used to define how the consensus around a qualitative method emerges in a given context, e.g. in defining how an environmental health risk implies personal experience related data for building a policy, not only quantitative, evidence-based knowledge on the risk.

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I. Haaz, Editor-in-Chief.

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Contact and submissions: Email: publications@globethics.net

Website: https://jehe.globethics.net

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