

CULTURE AS THE FOURTH PILLAR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

By Herman Greene

An issue that I believe is relevant to ESI is whether “Culture” should be considered the fourth pillar of sustainable development along with the three recognized pillars of economy, social and environment.

The term “sustainable development” itself is vague, but its power is inclusion. In the words of the *Jo’Burg Memo*, it “has evolved into a highly successful compromise. While developers and environmentalists had opposed each other for decades, the concept forced them into one common terrain.” Of course, this vagueness or compromise has its downside. The *Jo-Burg Memo* continues: “Certainly the price paid for this consensus was clarity. Dozens of definitions are used by experts and politicians, with the result that conflicting interests and visions [are] disguised as the same idea.” In my next email I will give my view on the adequacy of the language used in the sustainable development framework, but I will set that aside for now.

With all the divergent interpretations of sustainable development there is another concept that has gained widespread acceptance and serves as a compromise bringing inclusion and that is the concept that there are three pillars to sustainable development: economic, social and environmental.

These three pillars are well discussed in the article “What is Sustainable Development?” by Robert W. Kates, Thomas M. Parris, and Anthony A. Leiserowitz:

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development marked a further expansion of the standard definition with the widely used three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. The Johannesburg Declaration created “a collective responsibility to advance and strengthen the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development—economic development, social development and environmental protection—at local, national, regional and global levels.” In so doing, the World Summit addressed a running concern over the limits of the framework of environment and development, wherein development was widely viewed solely as economic development. For many under the common tent of sustainable development, such a narrow definition obscured their concerns for human development, equity, and social justice.

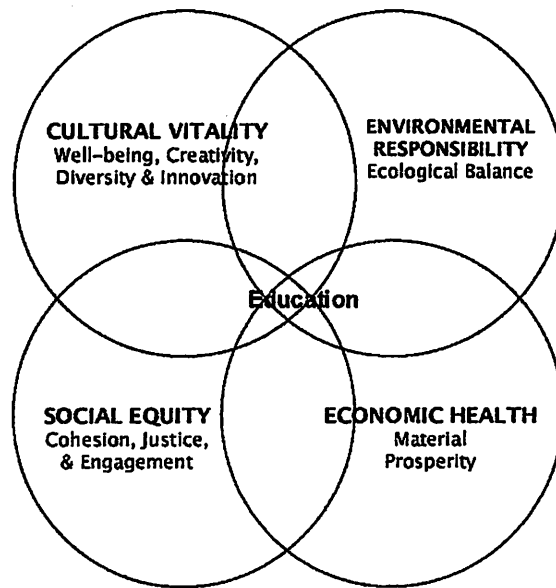
Thus while the three pillars were rapidly adopted, there was no universal agreement as to their details. A Web search of the phrase “three pillars of sustainable development” finds a wide variety of environmental, economic, and social pillars with differences most pronounced in characterizing the social pillar. Three major variants of social development are found, each of which seeks to compensate for elements missing in the narrow focus on economic development. The first is simply a generic noneconomic social designation that uses terms such as “social,” “social development,” and “social progress.” The second emphasizes human development as opposed to economic development: “human development,” “human well-being,” or just “people.” The third variant focuses on issues of justice and equity: “social justice,” “equity,” and “poverty alleviation.”

Since 2002, some people have been proposing a fourth pillar, that of culture. While it is always difficult to advocate for change in fundamental concepts of a historical tradition, I believe ESI should advocate for the fourth pillar of culture.

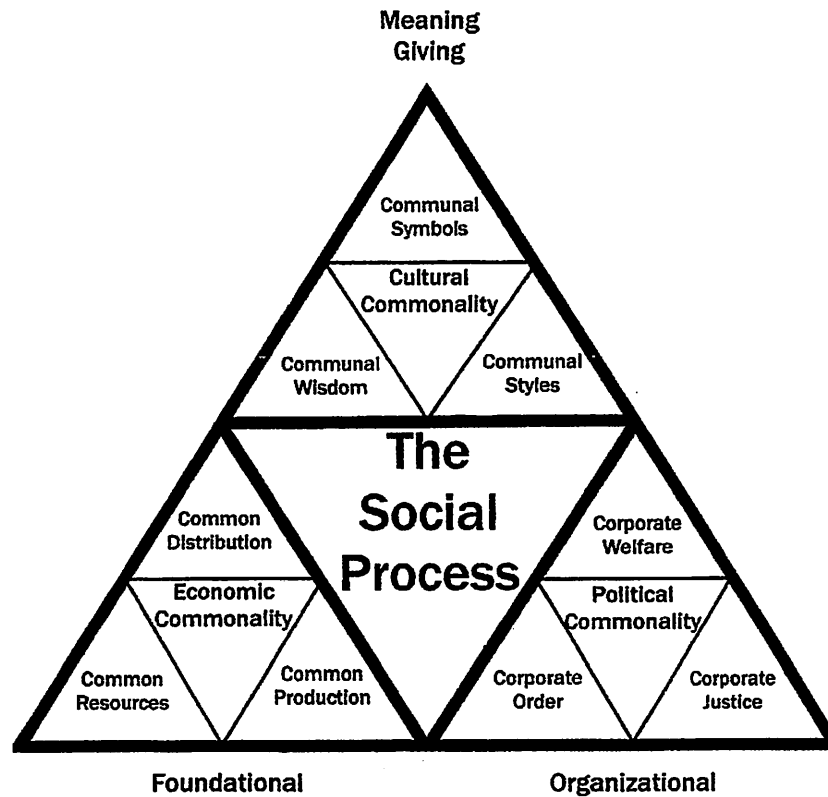
Having culture as the fourth pillar serves two important purposes. One is that there will not be sustainable development without cultural development. While, in principal culture may be represented by the social pillar, as far as I can tell the social pillar concerns human well-being, equity, justice and poverty alleviation in its ordinary usage. It does not stand for the changes in culture necessary to support sustainable development. Without culture as fourth pillar, I believe there is an implication that the values of modernity are sufficient to bring about sustainable development. The implication is that we, the world, need to do things better, not think about them differently or change our own lifestyles, values and behavior. ESI is counter to that implication.

The second purpose served by making culture the fourth pillar is to uphold the importance of cultural diversity, cultural heritage and wisdom, tolerance, and multiple paths of development. Among the groups supporting cultural as a fourth pillar are representatives of indigenous communities.

I will close by offering two ways of how culture can be imagined as a fourth pillar:



But I think an even better (because it better describes culture and its relation to human social processes), but incomplete image comes from examining the “Social Process Triangle” developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs of Chicago:



You will see that these triangles show three primary dynamics in society, the economic, political and the cultural. The pillars of sustainable development cover the three sub-dynamics of the economic in these triangles and the corporate welfare dimension of the political, plus environmental, which is either not shown on these triangles or is included, wrongly) in the economic. The point, I want to make is that the “three pillars” of sustainable development do not cover the three essential dynamics of the social process and leave unaddressed the meaning-giving or cultural dimension.

There is another version of these social process triangles that exaggerates the size of the economic triangle to show how there is an imbalance in the social process at present—the economic controls both the political and the cultural.

The social process triangles do not offer an easy bridge to the fourth pillar of the environment. In my thinking what the tripartite social process suggests is that environment is all encompassing and is something different than, and yet is inclusive of, the social or human process. It is the pillar behind all of the human pillars. Perhaps one could imagine a circle around the social process triangles to stand for the environment. This would imaginably suggest a geocentric view, where there would be three pillars of human development, the economic the political (including the social) and the culture, all in the context of, dependent on, and being a subsystem of Earth.

A four pillars approach may suggest that “environment” is only one-fourth of sustainable development. Ideally, we would see environment, or Earth’s life and life systems as primary, with the other three pillars included within it. But talking about four pillars, rather than the presently inadequate three is a step in the right direction.