



JOINT WEBINAR OF CCEE SOCIAL ISSUES &  
SAFEGAURDING OF CREATION SECTIONS

**ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES POSED BY  
CERTAIN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
MODELS**

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*Pope Francis addresses his “urgent invitation” to renew the dialogue “about how we are shaping the future of our planet”: “We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” The earth, our common home, “cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will”. “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years”...*

Pope Francis «Laudato si Encyclical»

**For a new development model in which the environment is the key to social and economic change.**

It was 1987 when Our Common Future was published, the final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the UN in 1983 and chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. The report is still considered a cornerstone of reflection on environmental issues and their connection with socio-economic imbalances. All subsequent global documents and conferences have referred to it, right up to the UN 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted in September 2015.

The Brundtland Report contains the most widely used and quoted definition of sustainable development: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

*Sustainable development is the ability of our species to live, in dignity and equity for all, without destroying the natural systems from which we derive the resources to live and without exceeding their capacity to absorb the waste and refuse from our productive activities. In order to achieve sustainable development of human societies it is necessary that: human intervention is limited within the carrying capacity of natural systems while preserving their vitality and resilience; technological progress in the production of goods and services is directed towards increasing efficiency rather than increasing the flow of energy and raw materials; levels of withdrawal of non-renewable resources exceed their regenerative capacity; the emission of waste and refuse (solid, liquid and gaseous) due to the metabolism of social systems does not exceed the assimilation capacity of natural systems.*

Thirty-four years later - after much analysis, discussion, commitment and even criticism - we can say that 'sustainability' has entered our vocabulary, but not that it

has been achieved. The economic and social system, despite some progress, is still far from being sustainable. A balanced relationship of mankind with the environment in which he lives is not yet within reach. New problems and threats have emerged, new scientific and technological achievements have brought hope, greater knowledge and sometimes illusions.

We have realised not only that it is difficult to change economic and social systems and lifestyles, but also that the results achieved are always provisional and unstable and require constant and lasting commitment. The awareness we have gained must therefore be translated immediately into concrete actions by all parties: governments, institutions, companies, financial operators, organisations, associations, individual citizens ... at all levels, from global to domestic, to prevent sustainability from remaining just a slogan.

In recent decades, the rapid acceleration in human activity has propelled us into a new era, the Anthropocene - The Human Epoch. Man, who has become stronger than nature, must take on the responsibility of looking after the planet, i.e. ensuring sustainability, which has three strongly interconnected components: ecological, economic and social. *"The reason we fail to live up to the climate moment we are living in is that the actions required are a direct challenge to the prevailing economic paradigm (deregulated capitalism with the austerity of the public sphere), to the theories on which western cultures are based (we humans are separate from nature and with our intelligence we can overcome the limit) and to many of the activities that shape our identities and define our communities.* (Naomi Klein, A revolution will save us. Why capitalism is not sustainable, Bur, 2015)

When it comes to sustainability, science can play, as it does in many other fields, on two opposite sides: it can contribute to sustainability, or it can undermine it. Zygmunt Bauman: Science and technology have helped mankind win many battles, but now they risk making us lose the war by making the planet uninhabitable. This stark warning must be heeded as a matter of urgency.

*In 2015, the UN has adopted the 2030 Agenda, the action programme that sets 17 Sustainable Development Goals with the commitment signed by 193 countries around the world, to "leave no-one behind". Heirs to the reflections on sustainability developed in many publications, at international summits and in the Millennium Development Goals, the new Sustainable development Goals (SDGs) call on everyone - governments, businesses, civil society and citizens - to overcome poverty and hunger, guarantee health and well-being for all, combat climate change, protect the environment and the seas, etc. These goals have become the reference framework for the 2030 Agenda. These objectives have become the universally recognised reference framework for sustainable development, a model that must necessarily hold together and integrate all dimensions (economic, social, environmental, institutional) in a new paradigm that overcomes the current - unsustainable - system of production and consumption.*

### **From a linear to a circular economy**

*The circular economy is a model of production and consumption that involves sharing, lending, reusing, repairing, reconditioning and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible. This extends the life cycle of products, helping to minimise waste. Once the product has completed its function, the materials from which it is made are reintroduced into the economic cycle wherever possible. Thus, they can be continuously reused within the production cycle, generating additional value. The principles of the circular economy contrast with the traditional linear economic model, which is based on the typical "extract, produce, use and throw away" scheme. The*

*traditional economic model depends on the availability of large quantities of readily available and cheap materials and energy.*

Economists/politicians argue that to get out of the recession we have to consume more because if consumption grows, so does production, employment and GDP. In the last 30 years, science has been asked to innovate to create products that are attractive and desirable to the consumer, no matter how useless, because advertising can always be used to impose them on the market.

As for waste, we have deluded ourselves into thinking that we can eliminate it by hiding it underground, dumping it in the sea, or burning it so that it will disappear, unseen, into the atmosphere. This process of economic development, fuelled by the energy of fossil fuels and based on consumerism and the throwaway of the linear economy, is taking us to the brink of an ecological abyss and is the cause of growing inequalities.

It is necessary to move as soon as possible to a circular economy... powered by renewable energy and characterised by the limited (saving) and intelligent (efficiency) use of the Earth's resources, aimed at manufacturing objects that are designed not only to be used, but also to be repaired and then reused, collected and recycled to obtain new resources. In a world of limited resources, consumerism is clearly an unsustainable development model from an ecological point of view, and it is also unsustainable from a social point of view because it promotes competition, induces us not to care about others and distances us from the idea of the common good.

Science can play an important role in many other factors conducive to sustainability. It can do so by: optimising the use of resources, reducing waste production, making material recycling more efficient, reinventing industrial processes on the basis of the most readily available materials, replacing scarce elements in high-tech products with more abundant ones, creating low-cost devices suitable for the sustainable development of backward countries, creating new job opportunities and, above all, spreading the culture of sustainability. We must find within ourselves the motivation to live according to the ethics of sobriety, solidarity and responsibility towards the Earth and all its inhabitants, present and future.

In its document "*Circular Economy Package: Questions and Answers*", the European Commission states "We cannot build our future on a use-and-throwaway model". The linear model of economic growth has proven to be unsustainable in a globalised world. This is why we talk about the circular economy, a system in which "the value of products and materials is maintained for as long as possible; waste and resource use are minimised and resources kept in the economy when a product has reached the end of its life cycle, in order to reuse it several times and create further value". It is therefore an economy in which growth is decoupled from the use of exhaustible resources. It is a system designed to be self-regenerating: materials of biological origin must re-enter the biosphere, while materials of technical origin are designed to circulate within the flow, without losing quality.

The evolution of sustainability thinking has brought environmental issues to the centre of ethical reflection on human relations and between humanity and nature. A first argument, typical of reflection in environmental ethics is a form of philosophical reflection which, "extending its field of interest as far as possible to the spatial and temporal dimensions of the whole environment in which, and on which human beings act, and decentralising the discourse from human agents, questions the ethicality of our relating directly or indirectly to non-human entities and/or natural dynamics and, which characterises and qualifies the sustainability approach, is undoubtedly the recognition of the concept of the limits of nature, which places constraints on the

consumption of resources, the absorption of pollution, the great cycles of life (air, water, oxygen, etc.), and on the extent to which these limits can be reached.

The environmental issue can no longer be restricted and relegated to the problem of pollution and the exploitation of environmental resources alone, but is taking on a global dimension that involves – albeit to different and differentiated degrees – all dimensions of people's lives and society.