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From the Sustainable Development to the Sustainable Community: the World Council of Churches' Contribution to the Concept of Sustainability¹

Abstract

At the turn of 20th and 21st century political activities are being inspired by two main ideas: the concept of 'civil society' and 'sustainable development'. The latter has recently become a background of the United Nations strategy to support international cooperation regarding social and ecological problems, in particular to eradicate poverty. The UN's activity is reviewed by the World Council of Churches, the biggest ecumenical organization. The WCC, when declaring its support to all initiatives striving to eradicate poverty and to foster peaceful political relations, suggests its own concept of 'sustainable community' and the concept of 'economy of life'. In this sense the ecumenical movement distinguishes itself from activities of secular political actors and imposes on Christians a task to promote new ideas and models of social life, inspired by the biblical teachings. This article defines the notion of sustainable development and discusses the main stages of its unfolding. Furthermore, the paper highlights the World Council of Churches' criticism of the concept of sustainable development and scrutinizes a contribution of the WCC to the global debate on new political and social philosophy.

Keywords: World Council of Churches, United Nations, sustainable development, sustainable community, economy of life.

Od zrównoważonego rozwoju do zrównoważonej wspólnoty: wkład Światowej Rady Kościołów do koncepcji zrównoważenia

Streszczenie

Działania polityczne w wymiarze globalnym na przełomie XX i XXI w. inspirowane są dwoma ideami: koncepcją społeczeństwa obywatelskiego i koncepcją zrównoważonego rozwoju. Ta druga stała się podstawą obranej przez Organizację Narodów Zjednoczonych strategii, która zmierzać ma do wspierania współpracy międzynarodowej odnośnie do

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problemów społecznych i ekologicznych, a zwłaszcza do likwidacji ubóstwa. Działania te są recenzowane przez Światową Radę Kościołów, największą organizację ekumeniczną. Światowa Rada Kościołów deklarując wsparcie dla wszelkich inicjatyw pomagających likwidacji biedy i kształtowania pokojowych relacji politycznych, proponuje swoją koncepcję, która określa terminami „zrównoważonej wspólnoty” oraz „ekonomii życia”. W ten sposób zaznacza swoją odmienność od działań świeckich podmiotów politycznych i przyjmuje na siebie zadanie promowania nowych idei i modeli życia społecznego, inspirowanych orędziem biblijnym. Artykuł definiuje pojęcie zrównoważonego rozwoju i omawia podstawowe etapy jego kształtowania. Wskazuje również na krytykę tego pojęcia ze strony Światowej Rady Kościołów i analizuje wkład genewskiej organizacji do międzynarodowej debaty poszukującej nowej filozofii politycznej i społecznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Światowa Rada Kościołów, Organizacja Narodów Zjednoczonych, zrównoważony rozwój, zrównoważona wspólnota, ekonomia życia.

In the 70's the post-war optimism was being replaced by the growing awareness of the large-scale, global problems. Economic crisis in Western countries and collapse of hopes of the emergent states in the postcolonial area, political calamities in Africa and Asia, conflicts and wars across the whole planet, famines occurring despite of the surplus of food production, droughts and other ecological catastrophes led many to the conclusion that the world is waiting for some radical changes. On the other side, technological revolution of mass media, one that speeded up and intensified globalization processes, helped to establish a common platform of communication among bodies and organizations that were conscious of the increasing interconnectedness of societies, states, cultures and economic relations. This awareness has been reflected in political and sociological reflections.

Nevertheless, the Western culture was only losing faith in progress which was declared to be an engine to propel common endeavours of societies and give them a meaning. The collapse of great ideologies coincided with the process of counter-revolution of 60's. Instead of cultivate the idea of progress, the Western world entered into the narrative of crisis. The whole change has been roughly summarized by Robert Holton while he was claiming that “contemporary social thought has become obsessed, if not dominated, by the idea of crisis”². Years later Piotr Sztompka developed this finding with the new identification of a recent social narrative: “Sociological approaches to social change have evolved in three typical forms: the discourse of progress in the period of classical sociology, the discourse of crisis characteristic for the middle of the XXth century, and the discourse of trauma, which seems to emerge at the end of the XXth century”³.

In spite of this gloomy forecast, there are other areas of discourses which appear to be spreading within a growing number of politicians, activists and com-

² R. HOLTON, *Problems of Crisis and Normalcy in the Contemporary World*, in: J.C. ALEXANDER, P. SZTOMPKA (ed.), *Rethinking Progress: Movements, Forces and Ideas in the End of Twentieth Century*, London 2002, 40.

³ P. SZTOMPKA, *The Ambivalence of Social Changes. Triumph of Trauma*, Berlin 2000 (Abstract).

mentators of social and politician tendencies. At the turn of the 21st century, it seems that the history has been mostly overtaken by two thoughts: the idea of civil society which by German politologist Klaus von Beyme was declared to be “the last ideology of the 20th century”⁴ and the vision of sustainable development. The latter has become a key term in contemporary politics, used by both mainstream and international organizations.

1. The idea of Sustainable Development

The notion of sustainable development has been promoted worldwide after it was used by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the document entitled “Our Common Future” (*the Brundtland Report*, after the Chair of the WCED, Gro Harlem Brundtland). The document has considered various ecological, economic and social challenges that were assessed to be serious threats to the natural environment and to the peace in the world. Since the significance of the term covers a vast area of questions concerning the future of the planet, there are several definitions referring to its meaning in the report. At the outset of scrutinizing its aspects, the authors have paid attention to the critical responsibility of mankind for following generations. They see the sustainable development as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁵. So described, the concept may be applied to a major part of economic, social and political systems unless they don’t accept “changes in access to resources and in the distribution of costs and benefits”⁶ in order to secure social equity between generations.

The basic meaning of the concept has been expanded upon by a multifaceted group of intertwined concerns. Firstly, according to the report, sustainable development requires changing on the level of culture, in order to promote patterns of lifestyle that impose limits on humans needs and desire. Sustainability thus opposes radically the philosophy of unrestrained consumerism, even though the document does not name it directly. Furthermore, the danger of consumerism manifests itself in both society and ecology: it deludes entire societies with aspirations and dreams to be never fulfilled and airily rejects an awareness of

⁴ F. MATHWIG, W. LIENEMANN, *Kirchen als zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure in aktuell politischen Transformationsprozessen*, in: CH. LIENEMANN-PERRIN, W. LIENEMANN (ed.), *Kirche und Öffentlichkeit in der Transformationsgesellschaften*, Stuttgart 2006, 87.

⁵ *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, New York 1987, 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*

ecological limits. It is worthwhile to note that the ecological threat has been more thoroughly considered than the social one.

Secondly as the document claims, sustainable development will be impossible unless a new economic approach will be worked out and accommodated across the whole world. Sustainability requires a model that does not reduce its evaluation of economic efficiency to the mere economic growth. Growth alone cannot reflect decreases in poverty and social exclusion. Also it does not diminish the threats to the natural environment by itself. The impact of economic growth is ambiguous; on one hand, since it provides a potential to meet human needs, it is a necessity. Hence, to certain degree, economic growth converges with sustainable development. On the other, it impedes the sustainability when it becomes a goal for economic as well as political activity imposed on social institutions. Focusing on growth and increasing productivity, when not constraint by the limits derived from the sustainability perspective, results in overexploitation of natural resource and extends areas of social exclusion. Hence, sustainable development assumes both economic growth as a means to meet human needs, and restrictions imposed on this economic growth, in order to cushion the impact of said growth on the natural environment and one the integrity of the fabric of society. At the conclusion of the thoroughly made scrutiny of the concept, the document defines the sustainable development as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development; and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations"⁷.

From this point onwards, the idea of sustainable development was declared to be a reference point for the goals of international organization as e.g. the UN for more just and more peaceful social relations as well as for better care of the natural environment. The idea of the sustainability of development launched during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (*Earth Summit*) in 1992, where it was considered from an ecological perspective. In order to introduce the agreements concluded in Brazilian city, the United Nations established in December 1992 the Commission of Sustainable Development. Today the Commission is one of the agendas of the United Nations Social and Economic Council, (ECOSOC) and consists of 53 members. It is worthwhile to mention that over one thousand of Non-governmental organizations representing all continents and a major part of countries (NGO) is accredited at the Commission; also it seems to be important

⁷ *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development.*

that one of its recognized goal is assisting in the establishment of civil society institutions⁸.

Three years later, while the UN gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark, the representatives of governments and states adopted the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development. In the document they acknowledged importance of human wellness for all societies, groups and individuals and pledged to give priority to the related objectives in the activity of international organizations in the 21st century. The authors of the declaration collected factors and defined the concept of sustainable development as follows: "We are deeply convinced that economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development, which is the framework for our efforts to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. Equitable social development that recognizes empowering the poor to utilize environmental resources sustainably is a necessary foundation for sustainable development. We also recognize that broad-based and sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development is necessary to sustain social development and social justice" (point 6)⁹.

While at its inception the proponents of the idea of sustainable development appeared to focus on the ecological concerns surrounding the integrity of economic development, its scope began to expand further: They soon directed their efforts at tackling poverty and social exclusion. Nowadays poverty is considered one of the most pressing priorities of the international political community. According to the document entitled *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* recently adopted (18 of September 2015) by the UN, "eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions including extreme poverty is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development"¹⁰. The document distinguishes three dimensions of the sustainable development: economic, social and environmental, furthermore, it names five areas for development: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership¹¹. Albeit a solemn endeavour, contemporary authors meticulously describe our reality as being one in balance between grand hopes and critical threats. The former are launched by the great opportunities of the technological progress, in particular in the communication area; also they are based on

⁸ L. HENS, B. NATS (ed.), *The World Summit on Sustainable Development. The Johannesburg Conference*, Dordrecht 2005, 329.

⁹ *Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development* (Annex 1), in: UNITED NATIONS, *Report of the World Summit for Social Development. Copenhagen 6–12 March 1995*, New York 1996, 3.

¹⁰ *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 3, in: http://www.unesco.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Transforming_our_World_The_2030_Agenda_for_Sustainable_Development.pdf (10.09.2016).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

discovery, that “hundreds of millions of people have emerged from extreme poverty”¹² in recent decades. The latter are related to a plenty of social, economic and ecological factors that put at risk “the survival of many societies and of the biological system of the planet”¹³. The authors observe the growing gap between the global South and global North, the pandemy of HIV and other contagious diseases, the question of women’s deprivation, violence, particularly against women, children and elder people, the growing problem of refugees, youth unemployment and the environmental degradation, to name just a few. Instead, and in order to answer the challenges, they propose their vision of sustainable development which is encompassed within a complex of 17 Sustainable Development Goals¹⁴. The list of the goals covers all declared above areas and dimensions of sustainability. It considers the needs of both societies and individuals while endorsing human rights, referring to humans not only in terms of biological subsistence but also in terms of economic and social wellbeing. It highlights particular and serious ecological challenges. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of peace and international cooperation and integration in order to achieve the assumed programme in the following fifteenth years. Considering its list of goals and their particular explanations, the notion of sustainable development has established a robust praxeological foundation. Although some may wish to dismiss the sustainable development as a wishful thinking, it is already becoming an important facet of political philosophy with regards to examination of the contemporary state and interstate power.

An important commentary should be attached. On the one hand, the Sustainable Development Goals may be acknowledge to be an answer for longing, doubts and fears of contemporary sociologists and philosophers who commonly expressed a concern about the world without a responsible power, the world that

¹² *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The list of the goals: 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere; 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well being for all at all ages; 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries; 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. *Ibid.*, 14.

can be compared to “an orchestra without a conductor”¹⁵, as named by Pierre Bourdieu or the world where a power reminds a historical institution of *absentee landlord*, as claimed Zygmunt Bauman¹⁶. The idea of sustainability contains in itself a potential to strive for an awareness of the common responsibility for the world society and the planet. On the other side, for similar reasons, the notion of sustainable development faces sharp criticism from those who are against any form of global governance. “The front against” consists of the pleiad of social and religious movements, these coming from a rather conservative and rights wings. In the UN programme they see another new project of new world order imposed on societies and violated human freedom. According to some of its critics, the Sustainable Development Goals can be seen as steps to consolidate the powers of a new global governance, the tendency that began in ancient Babylon. Here we see long established political tensions unfolding in a new way.

2. Community Instead of Development?

Although the official history of the World Council of Churches commences in 1948, its roots run to the Social Gospel and the Life and Work movements, both deeply concerned with the social matters. As the biggest ecumenical organization, the WCC has attempted from the very beginning to unfold its social teaching. Over time, the social commitment of the Genevan organization was shifted to the core of its activity. A turning point of theological reflection on society began at the international conference on “Church and Society” held in Geneva, 1966. In the very lively discussions and facing many controversies, the WCC affirmed the notion of development as a theological category that ought to be accommodated by the Christian churches. The theologically grasped development opened a door to a more active social involvement and sparked a dynamic reflection regarding society. In the same time, ecumenists from Geneva moved away from the former category of the responsible society, that was promoted by the WCC since the founding assembly in Amsterdam 1948 and above all since the conference entitled *The Responsible Society in National and International Affairs* held in Arnoldsheim, Germany, in 1956¹⁷. The idea of the responsible society assumed the churches have to play an active role in the social and political life but rather on the field of upbringing and education in order to form one’s attitudes. According to this category, churches ought not to affirm any particular socioeconomic and

¹⁵ M. JACYNO, *Iluzje codzienności. O teorii socjologicznej Pierre’a Bourdieu*, Warszawa 1997, 13.

¹⁶ Z. BAUMAN, *Płynna nowoczesność*, Kraków 2000, 23.

¹⁷ *The Responsible Society in National and International Affairs*, Geneva 1956, 14f.

political ideology, whether socialist, or capitalist and liberal. Instead, the development as the theological category, suggested churches to support these political actors who have believed governments and institutions of civil society should reflexively organize social and economic life. And, what seemed to be more important, churches confirmed the hopes of development as a solution to eradicate poverty and establish peaceful international relations¹⁸.

However, since then the idea of development has not met expectations and awareness of the world crisis has deepened. In particular because of the growing gap between rich and poor as well as because of increasing number of ecological catastrophes have served as catalyst for ecumenists to start asking for other solutions. While the WCC's gathering in Bucharest, Romania, in 1974, the theologians, scientists and economist from all over the world, proposed the concept of sustainability: "the idea that the world's future requires a vision of development that can be sustained in the long run, both environmentally and economically"¹⁹. Hence, it is to be highlighted, that the concept of sustainable development had emerged within the ecumenical movement twelve years before it has been used in the Brundtland Report.

Another next turn occurred at the outset of the new millennium. In 2002, when echoing the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, David Hallman, representative of the WCC expressed a growing disappointment with the notion of sustainable development and claimed the South African summit was "a missed opportunity"²⁰. According to him, agreements made during the summit were only poor substitutes of what could be achieved, particularly due to the reluctant attitude of the wealth countries and corporations. Hence, the concept of sustainable development has used up its potential. Instead, as the representative of the WCC he proposed a new category of ecumenical social teaching, namely the idea of sustainable community: "Rather than «sustainable development», we speak increasingly of «sustainable community». While continuing to carry the long-term perspective of sustainability, it moves away from the term «development» and focuses instead on «community» wherein can occur the nurturing of equitable relationships both within the human family and also between humans and the rest of the ecological community – in other words, justice within the whole of God's creation"²¹.

¹⁸ P. BECK, *In Search of a Responsible World Society. The Social Teachings of the World Council of Churches*, Philadelphia 1974, 208.

¹⁹ *Report on the World Summit on Sustainable Development*, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/neoliberal-paradigm/report-on-the-world-summit-on-sustainable-development-wssd> (15.09.2016).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

The concept of sustainable community is declared to be an answer for the new globalized world, a “global village” announced by Marshall McLuhan. Considering various factors related to globalization processes, particularly global opportunities on the one hand and diversity and the globalization of risk on the other, the world requires a quite new philosophy of political relations. The sustainable community is about looking for how to apply the rules of community life into the area of political and international relations. The concept is referring to the ecumenical movement category of the Kingdom of God, which suggests Christians must adopt responsibility for establishing more just and more peaceful relations. “Christians should be salt and yeast in society for the sake of justice, peace and the integrity of creation”²². Ethically and anthropologically, it is relied on an awareness of sufficiency; every member of community must be concerned about the principle of “there is enough for all and all have enough”²³. Even though the notion of sufficiency unfolds in more detailed praxeological programme, including “physical, mental and spiritual health, food security in quantity and quality, clean air and water, good housing, educational opportunities, and adequate transportation”²⁴, its core meaning refers to the biblical anthropology of one’s striving for ethically better, fulfilled life, for a common responsibility for mankind and creation, and finally, for eschatological salvation.

The specific theology of sustainable community inspired churches gathered in the WCC to depart from the secular category of development, one that has influenced ecumenical social teaching for over 40 years. Instead, the ecumenical organization seems to be back to the rather theological narration in its social teaching. The challenge and task imposed on Christians is to discern more just and more peaceful social relations and to present them to the society.

Churches thus must be less constrained by economic and political principles, rather they ought to provide advocacy of the poor and marginalized and defend the integrity of natural environment. Hallman summarize this theological vision of economy as follows: “All economic systems must be tested from the perspective of their effect on the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, which in these days includes many members of the natural world as well. God has created the whole cosmos to be good; it is a common inheritance for all peoples for all times to be enjoyed in just, loving and responsible relationships with one another. This understanding is foundational in our vision of a just and moral economy where: a) people are empowered to fully participate in making decisions that affect their lives, b) public and private institutions and enterprises are accountable and held

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

responsible for the social and environmental impacts and consequences of their operations, and c) the Earth and whole created order is nurtured with utmost respect and reverence rather than exploited and degraded²⁵.

In this vision churches support the striving for a more civil society, for instance while stressing the participatory process in exercising power, but they don't accept to be incorporated into the complex of secular social institutions in order to be another one Non-governmental organization. They have to distinguish themselves in order to credibly perform their functions.

This shift from the category of sustainable development to the category of sustainable community is well expounded in the present narrations of the WCC, for instance in the programme of the "Economy of life". The programme was initiated by the WCC as a follow-up to the Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE) process and focused on "eradicating poverty, challenging wealth accumulation and safeguarding ecological integrity"²⁶, seeing all these tasks as interrelated. The label of economy of life appears somewhat paradoxically to the economists. To the certain degree it reminds the primordial meaning of the term economy, that derived from ancient Greek as the composite word of *οἰκονομία* (household management) derived from *οἶκος* and *νέμω*. Economy of life refers to the new approach to the creation and neighbours, one that is founded on the both anthropological and sociological *metanoia*, and thus, consequently, on the transformative spirituality. According to the theologians from the WCC, "our current social, political, economic and ecological state of emergency runs counter to God's vision for life in abundance" and derives from the "thinking that human desires stand at the centre of God's universe"²⁷. Economy of life is thus relied on the pure theological concept embedded in Jesus words, revealed in the Holy Scripture and calling humanity to overcome the "sins of greed and egotism, to renew our relationships with the other and creation, to restore the image of God, and to begin a new way of life as a partner of God's life-affirming mission"²⁸. Hence, it reverses the paradigm of the modern, Smithian economics, with a profit, self-realization and self-satisfaction on the top of hierarchy of values. It might be thus named a counter-economics. Instead, the economy of life has to present to the people what means a good life and what is the significance of community and family. And both, the patterns of a good life and the patterns of communal relations are comprised in the concept of sustainability.

²⁵ *Report on the World Summit on Sustainable Development.*

²⁶ R.R. MSHANA, A. PERALTA, *Economy of Life. Linking Poverty, Wealth and Economy*, Geneva 2015, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

These thoughts have been expanded upon by the Olav Fykse Tveit, the General Secretary of the WCC, in its recently released lecture entitled *The Role of Religion in Sustainable Development and Peace*. While presenting the ecumenical approach to the United Nations Agenda 2030 about the sustainable development to the political and religious leaders, he promoted, even though in a somewhat hidden way, this new vision of the WCC, displayed in the programme of economy of life. When answering on the main question of the conference, he insisted that “religion informs peoples’ understanding of what constitutes a «good life», their hope, their self-esteem and belief in their own dignity and rights, their inspiration for asserting their dignity and rights, and their resilience in times of crisis”²⁹.

* * *

Tveit confirms the new ecumenical path charted in the perspective of the concept of sustainability, sustainable community and economy of life. Churches must be both involved in the social issues and they must distinguish themselves from the worldly powers. Christians are called to show modern nations an ideal of good social and individual life, which is derived from the Bible and inspired by various cultural patterns. They ought not to affirm any political strategies unless they defend these which are the poorest and excluded. If the sustainable development is declared to be a new paradigm for the international and global relations, churches have to ask about all related consequences for those who are on the margins of this development. Even though the proclamation of the sustainability by the WCC appears idealistic, it is the task of churches to espouse these ideas. They are not another non-governmental organization that supports development but their office is performed by a credible work for the God’s order in Earthly reality.

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²⁹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/speeches/the-role-of-religion-in-sustainable-development-and-peace> (15.09.2016).

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