

# **PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MULTI-RELIGIOUS AND MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF ASIA**

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Asia is a multiplicity of plurality which is multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. In multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts of Asia, identity and development are two central issues which are mutually inclusive in some situations, while mutually exclusive in certain other contexts.

In this paper, the author discusses the challenges to cultural identity in the multi-cultural context and sustainable development in the Asia of pluralism. Principles of sustainable peace and sustainable development are examined on the basis of education for religious pluralism, harmonious co-existence and education for world peace.

## **I. CHALLENGE TO CULTURAL IDENTITY IN MULTI-CULTURAL NATIONS**

An overview of culture of a nation would help us to realize the cultural identity of that nation. However, it is quite difficult to provide a strict definition about national culture or cultural identity of a nation in a context, where there are pluralities of ethnicity, language, religion and culture. In its history, each country has had a cultural homogenous crisis. In a multi-ethnic and caste society, multi-cultural and multi-religious existence is a fact, it is therefore to establish a homogeneous culture in a political ideal frame that often causes inner conflict, which is hard to avoid.

In contemporary times, globalization progress is indispensable, in which most nations in the world have opened the door to the outside world. Globalization, of course, has its positive impact, encouraging democratization and modernization. Thanks to progress, a model of ethnic pluralism in social and political structure of a nation will be formed step by step. The major ethnic group, which has a social role will have more power, influence, property and position in political system in a nation. In that case, spiritual values of state-official religion would be used as a model to heighten social economy of ethnic groups.

Social, economic and political conditions in globalization age have caused changing of a country's cultural identity and then has changed the present socio-political structure. In integration progress, ethnics, classes as well as languages, religions and territories will be effected by two-way progress: assimilation and catabolism, that is to assimilate cultural resource which have existed since long and at the same time to confirm the difference between traditional culture and foreign culture.

To select cultural policies to **promote** the development of a nation into a multi-cultural nation is appropriate choice to some multi-cultural nations, which

has many ethnics, cultures and religions. Cultural identity in this regard is cultural cohesiveness.

To maintain identity, depending upon the situation, may provide peaceful co-existence, or on the other hand it could also cause major conflict. Bloody riots in Asia nowadays tend to spread within a country into a larger territory and then be the important reason of some law and order crisis. Peaceful co-existence principles between Asian countries have worked, though, the homogenous policy has faced many challenges. As a result of this, more emphasis is on the majoritarian systems of government while discrimination toward minorities. Opposed to cultural aggression by world powers, many Asia communities have tried hard to affirm their identity, including terrorism and armed conflict.

If the principles of equality and human rights among different ethnic groups in a multi-cultural and multi-religious framework are respected, terrorism and armed conflicts will be reduced. In other word, once rights of each group in a society are ensured, the violence and conflict will be eliminated effectively.

When a religion is used as a political force, communal violence will be worse. In Asian history, some religious governments, by means of ruling power, have used identity policy to govern people in order to protect its state-religious domination and then caused peril and conflict situation among religious communities. To object to religious identity in that case leads to struggle movements, which uses violent means for gaining political ends.

Regional inter-governmental conflict prevention mechanism should be established in order to find solution for inter-ethnic or inter-community tensions. Moreover, regional inter-governmental organizations should be set up to resolve and stop riot and armed conflicts. With this, national and international tensions related to ethnical, cultural and religious issues in a nation would have a chance to be solved effectively.

## **II. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT**

Respect for multi-culture is a manifestation of spiritual cultural level, according to which all ethnic forms of culture are preserved and protected from the cultural erosion and perdition. While communal cultural identity is respected because of its connection with social development, cultural identity in a multi-cultural countries happens to be the cultural exclusion between the stronger system of culture and the weaker one. Violent conflict and war in a multi-cultural nation exist along with cultural inclusion process. Development of national culture on the basis of respecting cultural pluralism of other religions as positive values would pave the way for global social development.

Contrary to the communal identity of culture being respected due to its close connection with social development, the cultural identity in a multi-cultural nation would lead to cultural exclusion and elimination of stronger culture to the weaker one. Violent conflicts and wars in multi-cultural country often occur along with the process of cultural identity. National cultural development based

on appreciating other cultural differences will be the premise of global social development.

Development either material or cultural based on the law of demand and supply is generally conducive to exclusion and elimination. The national policy of respecting multi-religious and multi-cultural activities is on the one hand followed by social development, on the other development in exclusive manner has generated phenomena of conflict between ethnic groups and religions.

The nature of ethnics and religious development has caused centrifugal force which is capable of leading to a state of isolation and opposition, inherently being able to obstruct the process of cultural development in itself. Ethnic and religious multiplicity produces cultural richness on the one hand, and being plural, conflict on the other. Multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious nations are generally hard to be unified and united. It's hard to deny that the tendency of taking advantage of cultural and religious diversity along with efforts to breakaway will cause centrifugal force in the process of national unification.

In the process of globalization, acculturation is a modification of the culture of a group as a result of contact with a different culture, creating forces of absorbing exotic cultural data on the one hand, and change or deform the specialty of a traditional culture.

Sustainable development in a nation often connects closely to cultural pluralism and national identity of that country. Inter-connected dimensions of development need should be the main concern. First of all, cultural appearance and development are never an isolationism, but the process of globalization. Secondly, such a development must connect closely to benefit and social service. Posing the question for what and for whom this development is aiming at, we will see clearly that the purpose of development is aiming at human values and for the human sake, including those values higher than materials – to wit, ethics and spiritualism.

According to Dependent Origination doctrine of Buddhism, sustainable development is correlative phenomenon connecting closely to human resource development along with people-oriented approach as the focus of all human values, which should not be harmful to others species.

The process of sustainable development should not be valued on the the basis of quantity increasing, because it relates to organizations, institutions and the human participation; accordingly, quality and values of service are to be ensured. The need of development and primary national interests may be compatible or incompatible, but cultural dimension of development can't be neglected.

The interaction between development and cultural identity must be based on pluralistic and national characteristics. If the development doesn't lie within the orbit of common progress and benefit, it will be synonymous with traditional termination.

### III. FOCUS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is one that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need”.<sup>1</sup> Sustainable development is a harmonious development, which would not make any change to the productive potential of the ecosystem. It must not “endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth – the waters, the soils, and the living beings.”<sup>2</sup>

If education for sustainable development aims at giving opportunities to people to understand values, behaviors and lifestyle necessary for the process of positive societal transformation, its content will be the development of all positive aspect of life, whether material, ethical or spiritual, in the way of inter-being, mutual support and tolerance in the present and hereafter.

Governmental and non-governmental organizations should give financial support to poverty reduction programs as the goal of sustainable development. Strategic partnership in business plays an important role in this direction, aiming at ensuring developmental achievement, helping globalization to have a human face. Human investment here is to support communal social developments. The UN<sup>3</sup> has appealed to every global citizen for pondering on the choice of international market between calculations of short-term profit and human face profit; between a selfish freedom neglecting the fate of losers and the future responsible achievements, manifesting a global and paranormal vision toward global community.

There should be a systematic global engagement for peace-building and sustainable development, while reducing poverty in terms of economics and ethics. It is necessary to make market which produces potential and opportunity of self-relying economy as the foundation of peace and sustaining of achievements and developments.

Resources for sustainable development can be obtained from human wisdom– past and present, whose share and distribution will never be exhausted in future. Positive values from the traditional multi-cultural and multi-religious Asia may be considered cultural resources for sustainable development. Sustainable development is to set up a sustainable global society, in which, every global citizen is supposed to enjoy human rights, economic justice and peaceful culture.

Sustainable development requires universal responsibility of ethics, not only in this life but also in the hereafter, in the relation between man and man, man and nature, as well as man and **animal world. This would help us with** insight, without fear, and without denying the variety, respecting all cultures and co-

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<sup>1</sup> *Our Common Future*. From One Earth to One World, An Overview, by the World Commission On Environment And Development, Oxford University Press, printed in Great Britain in 1987, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary General Kofi Annan in *De Mello, UNHCHR Report on Business and Human Rights*, 2003.

existing in understanding the cultural diversity.

From the Buddhist point of view, sustainable development itself is of human development, assuring human security and bringing about human welfare not only for this life, but also in the hereafter.

Preventing violent conflicts, promoting positive virtues and establishing lasting peace and building the environment is to make sustainable development possible. Transformation of root causes of conflicts and investment for sustainable development are necessary foundation for sustainable peace.

Peace and sustainable development are interrelated. When there is no longer a war, development will be sustainable. When sustainable development remains, peace will prevail. Management of globalization, peace and sustainable development would be the main concerns of world and religious leaders.

In the process of globalization aiming at developing the poorest communities on earth, sustainability is a lasting challenge. Development of human values and ethics along with development of human rights are criterion of sustainable development.

The global partnership for development is one of the factors leading to sustainable development. The central challenge we face today and which is difficult to overcome is not globalization itself, nor acculturation, but it is how to “ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for the world’s people”.<sup>4</sup> Sustainable development in this context would bring about human welfare and happiness.

#### **IV. EDUCATION FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IS FOUNDATION OF PEACE**

Religious education, particularly Catholic education<sup>5</sup> in Asia ignored the reality of cultural plurality of Asia leading to the rejection and exclusion of the cultural reality of other religions, resulting in cultural occupation and exclusion of non-Catholic culture. As a result of religious exclusion, mistrust, doubts, hatred and violent conflict have been raised among other religious communities.

The contemporary Catholic education system has its focus on Asianness, in a way that utilizes Asian cultural database as resourceful tools for theology. This tendency leads to identity assimilation. If the exclusive theology creates misunderstanding, intolerance, social exclusion or even religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, then the shifting from exclusivity to inclusivity, from the need to become majority to being content with being minority, is the new Asian policy for effective conversion.

Advocating and respecting religious pluralism in the modern context is an art of peace-building on the basis of being loyal to one’s own religion, at the same time, being open-minded and understanding multi-culture and multi-

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<sup>4</sup> Heads of State Statement, *UN Millennium Summit*. 2000

<sup>5</sup> “Religious education” is used identical with “Catholic education” and in different contexts interchangeable. In this paper, the author differentiates the two, because the latter is narrow while the former is wider including education from other religions.

religions. Religious education in this regard would transform cultural occupation. For this purpose, religious education should focus on significant multi-religious dialogues.

The purpose of religious education is to recognize other religions as cultural realities which have values framework and establish friendship, dialogue and co-existence in terms of mutual respect, understanding and peace. Its main concerns are to bring out reconciliation, healing, harmony and peace among pluralist communities. Such a religious education should be sincere, open-minded, encourage participation and dialogue, which may transform social conflict.

## **V. CO-EXISTENCE IS PEACE-BUILDING**

Co-existence<sup>6</sup> is a state in which two or more groups are living together in time or place while respecting their pluralism whether political, religious, cultural or ethnic, on the basis of resolving their conflicts through understanding, tolerance and non-violence. Co-existence is to exist in mutual tolerance and to agree to settle conflicts without recourse to violence.

Co-existence is a process which emerges before or after violent conflict, while education for co-existence is a necessity for peace-building through dialogue and non-violent means. Co-existence would exist when partners accept and live with plurality. Acknowledgment and living with political, religious and cultural pluralities is a commitment of tolerance, mutual respect, and solving conflicts not on the basis of mutual exclusion or violence.

The nature of co-existence is to establish social harmony amongst individuals, communities, countries and alliances. In order to make co-existence sustainable, peace and happiness of every partner should be considered as main concern and purpose. Efforts for sustainable peace and sustainable development include acknowledgement of past mistakes, calling for forgiveness, searching for justice, rebuilding brotherhood, and re-establishing social system and communal structure on the strength of respect for equality.

## **VI. PEACE EDUCATION IS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

According to Buddhism, sustainable peace and sustainable development are two facets of the same problem, i.e., one's existence would entail the other. Their mutual existence can not be separated. The interactive and entailing features between sustainable peace and sustainable development have involved variedly and substantially to the way of peace-building as well as content and the method of its developing.

Efforts toward sustainable peace are always confronted with challenges. In 2006, Middle East conflict and nuclear crisis in Iran and North Korea have

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<sup>6</sup> The term "co-existence" came into common usage during the cold war, particularly used in the context of the world two powers, i.e. USA and U.S.S.R in the late 80s. This concept is later used as an art of tension reduction between inter-state conflict including non-aggression, respect for sovereignty, national independence and non-interference in internal affairs.

caused violent attacks and terrorism in many parts of the world. Armed conflict, civil wars, guerrilla wars, ethnic violence and separatist movement in Asia in particular and in the world in general have caused untold misery and even the death for many generations. Terrorism with terrorist attacks has become threatening and challenging to human beings. About 1.6 million people die every year because of the violence. If every global citizen practices compassion, loving kindness and transformation of anger and hatred in order to establish a culture of peace, we probably could save more than one million people each year from violent deaths.

Peace education, as a means to eliminate armed wars, concerns not only conflicts arising from foreign occupation, wars, exploitation, injustice and human rights abuse, but also strives for a culture of peace, for building a non-violent and just society necessary for existence and development of human race on earth.

Peace education is a source to provide an insight into global issues, in order to make a positive change. Peace education is also of prime importance in building a global society, which is really peaceful and prosperous.

In a broader sense, peace education is linked to disarmament education, environment education, human rights education and international education.

Peace education would support and supply background knowledge about civilizations, cultures and religions, so that peace practitioner intentionally acknowledges social pluralism, in order to accept and respect plurality. The inter-cultural methods of teaching should lay stress on education for world peace. Peace education is a re-confirmation of religious and cultural pluralism to be respected in a modern society. All aspects of arts, literature, the way of living, co-existence, value system, traditional and religious belief are to be considered as cultural characteristics, which need our respect and protection.

Peace education should focus on education of religious diversity and cultural pluralism, as an aspect of freedom of choice. Peace education helps global citizens avoid all forms of clash of civilizations. This is also one of the foundations of economics, knowledge and ethical and spiritual development.

According to Buddhism, war can not be considered as means nor a solution for peace-building. While hatred can not be ceased through hatred, war is in no way a foundation of peace. War is followed by violence, bloodshed, death, destruction, separation and is considered a cause of social crisis. For Buddha trade in weapon, alcohol and drugs is an unrighteous career, because it is harmful to physical and mental health and human ethics. Negative impact of this kind of trade is to make community and society collapse. Building peace on the basis of respect, love, understanding, tolerance is a good way to gain sustainable peace for sustainable development.

Sustainable peace-building should be started from the trend to foster social and political inclusion, in order to reduce violence and war to minimum. To minimize riot is to give prominence to peace via sustainable development and poverty alleviation. It is also a way to reduce the root causes of social crisis,

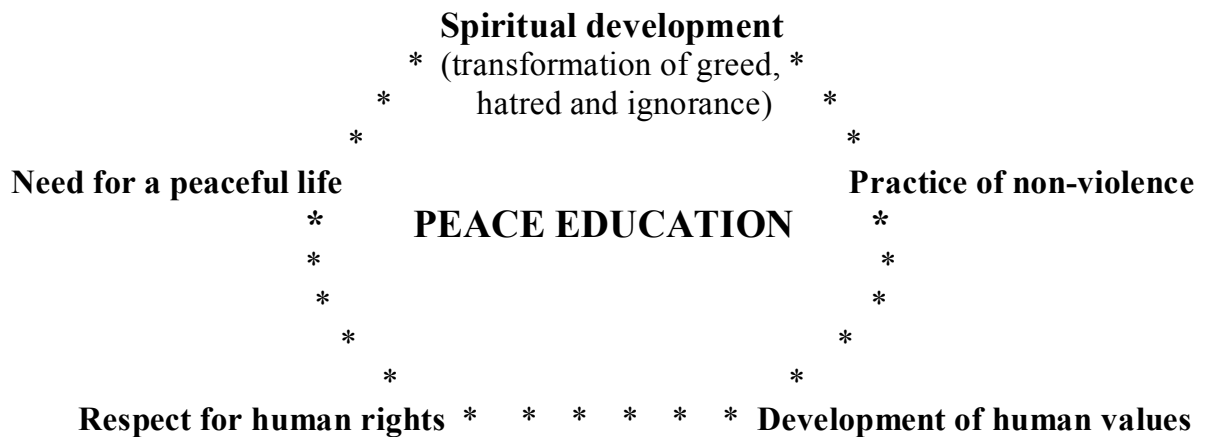
which is considered the focus of progressive sustainability of each nation.

Theistic religious leaders should make efforts to avoid religious extremism and should not use religion as a justification for violence or excuse for war or conflict.

The inter-religious dialogue should be for religious peace-building, instead of an excuse for identity inclusion for the sake of conversion. The main concern of national and international inter-religious organizations should be as how to build the bridge among religious bodies and promote believers' awareness of peace issues. Religious efforts for peace should be carried for the sake of human welfare and happiness.

According to Buddhism, the highest sustainable peace is the inner peace in each person. Inner peace leads to world peace. Peace building in that way is a source of sustainable development. In other words, the key to peace-building and world harmony is the peaceful mood in every human heart. Mental training and transforming are considered the first and important job, which should be taken care of by the world peace organizations.

Religious people should practice principles of universal compassion and respect for equality and harmonious co-existence. Peace-building workers should be objective and patient in solving conflicts, avoiding the risks of religious exclusiveness or unintentionally violent promotion of what is considered as truth according to one's own religion.



Peace-building can be achieved through various ways, namely: negative peace action which focuses on war ending as well as root causes of war, while positive peace action, according to the Buddhist teachings, is to practice transformation of social roots of violence right from the human mind, such as, mental obstacles in the way of ethical and spiritual development and human happiness. A model of sustainable peace education consists of awareness of need of peace, practice of compassionate and non-violent lifestyle, respect for human rights and human values. At the same time, it should be invested along the lines of spiritual development, in order to transform human suffering.

In order to achieve negative peace, global communities should participate in war rejection activities, rejecting foreign occupation, discouraging violent activities, saying no to weapons proliferation and human rights abuse, dissolving social roots of inequality, economic injustice, governance failures, development obstacles and especially social exclusions.

For attaining positive peace, every human should practice insight meditation to transform psychological roots of greed, hatred and ignorance while developing compassion and wisdom. When peace is achieved by every heart, every family and every community– it is a really sustainable peace. When sustainable peace is made possible in human mind, it entails sustainable development from material, mental, ethical and spiritual perspectives.

According to Buddhism, when sustainable peace and sustainable development prevail on earth, the so-called suffering world is not different from the Pure Land. A Pure Land with sustainable peace and sustainable development is not only necessary for Asian communities but also for the global community.



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