From the Writer

I find non-fictional writing most appealing to read when it discusses a topic with passion and offers a fresh perspective, all this in a clear and concise format. Integrating these characteristics into a strong and cohesive essay is far from trivial and, to this end, having a strong passion or even a personal infatuation for the topic helps tremendously. I chose to analyze the increasing prevalence of sustainable processes around the world, as this is a subject very relevant to today's changing times. Additionally, the issue is particularly relevant to my Economics coursework, and it posed a personal interest to me as an international student. Most importantly, the topic could be condensed to a set of questions, making the scope narrow enough to allow a focused analysis, yet broad enough to stimulate individual research and leave room for further questions.

Although I often find deciding upon a facet of the topic the most difficult step in writing a research paper, synthesizing various sources of information and weaving my own voice into coherent prose also poses a considerable challenge. For this, I found going through several write-revise-rewrite cycles inevitable, and the final draft differed considerably in structure to my initial outline. This editing process also underlined the importance of writing in a dense, non-redundant style at both the sentence and paragraph levels in order to express complex ideas while bound by the prescribed word limit.

In this vein, I feel that I could have improved upon increasing the readability of my essay somewhat, particularly by outlining its structure in a concise and straightforward manner before diving into the main arguments or providing definitions. The challenge, then, would have been to write a more comprehensive introduction while not repeating ideas in different sections. Additionally, quoting material from outside the three principal sources may have allowed for a broader scope. In particular, the political context of environmental and social sustainability may have contributed to the discussion.

— George Brova

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The Emergence of Environmental and Social Sustainability

The concept of sustainable development has drawn considerable attention over the past half-century, proving very controversial in discussions of definition, scope, and possible means of realization. Numerous authors have written on the topic, each expressing unique ideas of where sustainability might lead society, of whether it is beneficial overall, and of how different entities might achieve it. David Henderson expresses a critical view of the current trend towards enforcing sustainable development, adamantly refuting the idea that sustainability is even desirable in "The Case Against Corporate Social Responsibility"; on the other end of the spectrum, the UN "Rio Declaration on Environment and Development" asserts that humans have a wide range of intrinsic rights, of which the right to an unsullied environment is pivotal. The International Forum on Globalization, "A Better World Is Possible!," assumes the middle ground, conceding that a strict policy of sustainability will not necessarily solve all problems, but nevertheless promulgating it as a necessary, albeit incomplete, first step. Upon scrutinizing these various positions, this paper concludes that despite the ostensible lack of desirability to implement sustainable means of social and environmental development, the collective action of individuals, corporations, and governments will ultimately increase sustainability at both the local and international levels.

The phrase "sustainable development" is decidedly overused, thus necessitating a more specific and rigorous definition. In its simplest form, a process such as logging, driving, or hiring manual workers is deemed sustainable if it can be continued indefinitely without depleting the resources on which it relies. While measuring the rates of consumption and replenishment is difficult and often ambiguous in practical contexts, the peculiarities of measurement are mostly irrelevant in considering the macroscopic trend of establishing patterns of development. Although sustainable development can refer to a wide range of societal actions or processes, environmental and social decisions are those most often scrutinized.

The notion of environmental sustainability is essentially very simple, its core condition being that processes replenish all the resources they consume (or that the said resources are naturally replenished in the time required for the process to run). Ecological sustainability needs to be achieved through economic activity that enables us to "meet humans' genuine needs in the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, and without diminishing the natural diversity of life on Earth" (Intl. Forum on Globalization 488). Logging offers a simple example, whereby sustainability is achieved if the number of trees cut is smaller than the number of trees replanted. Similarly, harnessing solar or wind energy is sustainable in that the process can occur indefinitely and without affecting the source. However, determining whether a pollution-causing process is sustainable presents a separate challenge, as the exact type and quantity of pollution must be considered. While processes are often favored for being "carbon-neutral," they are not implicitly sustainable, as other factors may not fully balance out. Despite these difficulties in precisely delineating the line between partial and total sustainability, the difference between the two is minimal and irrelevant to a large extent, given the large number of distinct processes that may help to counterbalance each other.

Social sustainability is slightly more ambiguous; however, one of its more common contexts is that of providing international aid in the form of manufactured goods (principally food, clothing, and occasional aid to reconstruct) to impoverished or disaster-stricken regions. Is this approach the most effective way to help alleviate the devastation? The model of alleviating immediate problems is not sustainable and may therefore not be the best way to provide effective aid. The better alternative would be to use the aid money to invest in infrastructure: that is, to create the means to enable local manufacture of necessary goods (or other goods tradable for the necessary goods).

Another issue in the social sustainability debate is that of employing workers, especially in developing countries, at minimal wages and in dismal working conditions. Such "sweatshops" have been discredited widely, and the moral argument is indeed a compelling one. The International Forum on Globalization maintains that sustainable societies must actively protect the rights and livelihoods of workers in both the formal and informal sectors, as well as those who are unemployed or underemployed (488). However, an analysis of the precise effects and influences created by such jobs must take account of the fact that they merely provide the opportunity to work and do not forcibly conscript workers. That is, although the conditions characterizing such jobs are not ideal, they are better than the next best available alternative—if they weren't, nobody would accept these jobs. In any case, determining what policies would best serve the interests of those disadvantaged has caused passionate debate.

The danger of running an unsustainable process, then, appears obvious: eventually, the necessary resources are exhausted and the process must either readjust to consume different resources (or the same resources in different proportions) or perish. Altering a process in this way is inefficient and creates a counterproductive period of adjustment during which the products are either unavailable or artificially expensive. Choosing to gradually redesign a process in cycles of research, development, and testing seems to be a better approach, far more efficient and immensely less complicated than suddenly realizing the need to radically change or terminate it. The UN Declaration decrees that states must play a role in "cooperat[ing] to strengthen endogenous capacity-building for sustainable development by improving scientific understanding" in its 9th Principle (412). To lend a contemporary example, the demand for hybrid and other fuel-efficient cars rose in response to higher gas prices. Since unsustainable processes by definition cannot occur forever, such transitions to increasingly sustainable processes must eventually take place—the only question is when. Henderson argues that the timing should be left entirely to the market and warns of the dangers of "over-regulating the world economy" (206). At the same time, it may seem intuitively obvious that sooner is better: the earlier we decrease consumption of a resource (be it coal or clean air), the more of it will be left over for our future enjoyment, whereas the advantages of postponement are virtually inexistent.

Unfortunately, a manager has ample incentive to postpone such expensive transitions. Why make the economically unpopular decision to conduct research and development or make expensive capital investments given that the competition seeks short-term profit? Although sustainable development is eventually necessary even from an economic standpoint, the long-term benefits are not attractive to many individual managers, who are compensated for their ability to maximize short-term performance. On a purely managerial basis, little incentive exists to switch to alternative processes until this change is necessary, despite the economic benefits of switching early and minimizing costs and down time. As the International Forum on Globalization affirms, the leadership in many global corporations is an "undemocratic, inefficient, and ultimately destructive way of organizing human affairs" (484).

Our sense of social responsibility, on the other hand, may provide incentive to consider the long-term implications of societal actions, be they environmental or social, when corporate greed fails. Unhindered by differences in price or convenience, all rational consumers would prefer environmentally and socially responsible practices. When bringing price into the equation (remembering that convenience is simply the cost of time), we must keep in mind that any decision to purchase a good carries more than a dollar cost; it also carries the environmental and social costs of producing that good. Consumers must be mindful of the repercussions of dumping pollutants into the air or creating unjust and inhumane working conditions across the world when deciding what to purchase—after all, these are pollutants that we eventually inhale, and groups of people that are unjustly subjugated as a result of our decisions. For these reasons, rational consumers would demand that environmental and social factors are taken into account when companies operate. An obvious and very real problem in this model is that many consumers are ignorant of these hidden costs, and instilling a sense of awareness and responsibility is therefore a necessary step. Ideally, our society will evolve such that consumers vote with their wallets for the best value, where the seemingly transparent environmental and social costs are minimized, even if doing so entails paying a premium.

Such a change in preference explains the emergence of corporate social responsibility. Given the demand for goods produced in a socially responsible way, some corporations will adjust their means of supply in order to satisfy this new niche. Whether to interpret the advent of this market force as a welcome shift towards sustainable development or a "misguided . . . false view of the world [with] damaging consequences for people in general" (Henderson 203) remains in the eyes of the beholder. Of course the model is not perfect, since problems arise when trying to quantify the invisible tribulations against difference in dollar costs, in order to determine which product has the greater value. Clearly, individuals will each assign their own value to abstract and very public resources such as the environment or social well-being, and the acceptable thresholds will therefore differ drastically.

The economic implementation of this mentality fathered the notion of corporate social responsibility. There is no question that corporations have a grand role to play, for they are members of society and indisputably influential ones at that! The debate of corporate social responsibility centers around the rules and regulations to which corporations should be held accountable, as well as the extent to which governmental regulation must play a role in instilling this sense of responsibility. Henderson argues that being socially responsible not only detracts from a company's profits but also undercuts society, noting that complying with regulations introduces unnecessary and wasteful overheads in addition to undermining the economic process (205). This detriment may be real, but unfortunately, markets tend to operate in short-term time frames, whereas the notion of corporate social responsibility is a result of enduring factors. As such, the emergence of a long-term market factor carries benefits for society in the long term, despite a slight rise in short-term inefficiency.

Henderson also condemns society's ostensibly frequent and impetuous reactions to inequality, drawing attention to a perceived sense of "global salvationism" and claiming that it holds a "distorted view of globalization and its effects" (204). Henderson may or may not be correct in claiming that globalization has not marginalized poor countries, and he is certainly right in arguing that markets are now more open and competitive; however, the very shift of power from government to private corporations carries with it a similar transfer of responsibility. As the UN Declaration affirms in its 16th Principle, the polluter should bear the cost of pollution (413). In other words, corporations are now more empowered than ever to influence our world, and the notion of corporate social responsibility decrees that they should wield this power conscientiously and in a sustainable manner.

As we have seen briefly, governments have a responsibility to encourage and augment corporate social responsibility. Henderson laments that many governments now endorse the notion of corporate social responsibility (203). At the same time, the UN Declaration emphasizes that states have an equally large role to play in facilitating social wellbeing, and that regulations are therefore often necessary and conducive to making the greatest number of people most well-off—not only today, but for years to come.

Another significant governmental role lies in combating the effect of externalities—actions with repercussions that do not directly affect those making the initial decision, and which are therefore omitted from the executive process. Assessing and controlling the effects of these externalities is a crucial byproduct of encouraging sustainable development. In the case of the environment, for example, our decisions to drive more or not use energy-efficient light bulbs not only affect us, but also everyone else by contributing to the degradation of the environment, the common resource for everything living on this planet. Governments may seek to combat such externalities by assigning explicit costs to communally destructive actions, as through taxation or outright banning of particularly destructive behaviors. These actions can eventually converge in order to "facilitate the cooperative coordination of national policies on matters where the interests of nations are inherently intertwined" (Intl. Forum on Globalization 484). While governmental intervention is always controversial for allegedly causing inefficiency, these measures of combating externalities can in fact increase total social surplus and thus lead to increased efficiency.

All these examples serve to illustrate that moral and economic objectives are inextricably bound. Long-term economic incentives exist to facilitate and encourage sustainable development, and our sense of social responsibility can serve as an equally powerful supporter over the short term, via both direct action and within the economics framework. Thus, corporations can reap economic benefits by instigating sustainability, and individuals profit from a cleaner environment or a better society. Governments can also encourage environmentally and socially friendly measures by compensating for externalities. As a result of these multiple and interrelated factors, society's actions will inevitably lead to sustainable social and economic development.

Works Cited

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GEORGE BROVA was born in Galati, Romania but soon moved with his family to Tokyo, Japan, where he attended primary school in Japanese and subsequently transferred to an international school. He is now a Trustee Scholar at Boston University, where he is pursuing a double major in Computer Science and Economics while juggling the exciting new privileges and responsibilities that student life presents. A trilingual, George enjoys traveling the world and has visited over twenty countries but he enjoys exploring new parts of Boston on his evening runs just as much! This essay was written for Masse Ndiaye's WR 100: Global Transformations and Local Cultures.