

Local action to promote sustainable lifestyles, International and Israeli examples: The Heschel Centre

Abstract

The discourse on sustainability is relatively recent and has evolved over the last two decades. In its initial stages, the discourse was confined to green activists and academics but over the years it has spread to decision makers at all levels, the business sector and in particular to large corporate multi-national companies. Actions to promote sustainability however are lagging far behind the rate needed to reverse deterioration of the world's life support systems. Although there is common agreement at international level on the need for change and some change is being achieved through technological progress, international summits, commitments by countries and activities in the business sector to go beyond compliance with stricter regulations, actions are not managing to change currently unsustainable trends.

In contrast to the lack of effective action at the international and national levels, progress is being made on the ground by groups of civil society, non-governmental organizations and communities. Local actions are not only ahead of academic research but are ahead of top-down actions by countries or through the implementation of international agreements.

This paper presents and analyzes examples of radical and significant change from a number of areas of local sustainable activity in Israel and elsewhere around the world, in order to identify some common guiding principles for promoting local level sustainability. Understanding of such examples may contribute to formulating policies for promoting sustainability at a larger scale. The review focuses on projects which do not only propose innovative solutions to problems but in addition provide new channels of creative thought which could be harnessed in the 21st century to providing answers to questions of sustainability.

The review is based on a collection of best practice, from experience around the world which has been identified as effective for the promotion of local sustainability and from the experience of ongoing activity in Israel. The compilation was prepared by the Centre for Local Sustainability at the Heschel Centre for a report on successful examples of social initiatives which could provide a basis for learning for the future.

A wide view of sustainability determined the choice of examples included in this paper, based on fundamental values of sustainability and expressed through a number of parameters:

- Rehabilitation of natural and social 'commons'
- Reduction of economic gaps and eradication of poverty
- Promotion of wellbeing
- Self-fulfilment and the promotion of the public good
- Active citizenship

- Inclusiveness
- Rediscovering the interconnectedness of people with nature and each other
- Enhancement of natural and cultural diversity
- Transparency

The examples selected fulfill at least three of the parameters above of a wide definition of sustainability. Selected projects also demonstrated at least four of a further set of action principles which were identified during the review of best practice, including: a new conceptual framework, an innovative cultural model, upstream approaches, community strengthening and a radical improvement of the efficient use of resources.

In conclusion, this paper seeks to consider what are the values and principles for local sustainability initiatives which promote a wide concept of sustainability. It is a first attempt at identifying local initiatives and it is hoped that the compilation of examples will contribute to mutual learning between leading agents of change and policy makers, to enlarge the scope of activity and to generate wide cultural change essential for the transition to sustainability.