

POSTMODERN SOCIETY, SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION: THE INCOMPLETE SEARCH FOR SOLIDARITY

*SOCIEDADE PÓS-MODERNA, CONSUMO SUSTENTÁVEL E
ORGANIZAÇÃO DAS NAÇÕES UNIDAS: A BUSCA INCOMPLETA
POR SOLIDARIEDADE*

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Abstract

Given the importance of keeping consumption levels within the environment's carrying capacity and natural limits to growth, this article examines the interconnections between postmodern society, the United Nations (UN) and sustainable consumption. Throughout the article, the main characteristics of postmodern society and their relationship with the problem of unsustainability are analyzed. The historical process of the UN's struggle for a sustainable global community, based on data on social inequalities and the human impact on ecosystems, is taken as a background. The article highlights the need for strong

Resumo

Dada a importância de manter os níveis de consumo dentro da capacidade de carga do meio ambiente e dos limites naturais para o crescimento, este artigo examina as interconexões entre a sociedade pós-moderna, a Organização das Nações Unidas (ONU) e o consumo sustentável. Ao longo do texto são analisadas as principais características da sociedade pós-moderna e sua relação com o problema da insustentabilidade. Admite-se como fundo o processo histórico de luta da ONU por uma comunidade global sustentável, baseado em dados de desigualdades sociais e sobre o impacto humano nos ecossistemas. O artigo destaca a necessidade de uma gover-



global governance, combined with changing society's habits and the use of solidary economy practices to support the realization of the right and duty to sustainable consumption. The research is qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and deductive. The methodological procedure is bibliographical and documentary.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; solidarity economy; global governance; post-modern society; United Nations Organization.

nança global forte, aliada à mudança de hábitos da sociedade e ao uso de práticas de economia solidária para auxiliar na efetivação do direito-dever ao consumo sustentável. A pesquisa é qualitativa, exploratória, descritiva e dedutiva. O procedimento metodológico é bibliográfico e documental.

Palavras-chave: consumo sustentável; economia solidária; governança global; sociedade pós-moderna; Organização das Nações Unidas.

Introduction

The issues involving consumption are quite broad. Even the simplest societies necessarily consume water, food, energy and minerals, that is, every act of consumption has environmental consequences. As a result, the importance of keeping consumption levels within the environment's carrying capacity or the natural limits for growth has long been recognized.

The intellectual basis for this idea was laid in England as early as the 18th century by Thomas Malthus in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Other more modern grounds were laid in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a series of publications including the Club of Rome report *The Limits to Growth* and the warning by the neo-Malthusian Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb*.

All of these works have documented an inevitable clash between the material demands of an ever-expanding world population and increasingly depleted finite environmental resources, that is, between increasing environmental pollution and the weakening of ecosystems' ability to regenerate. Simply put, the messages challenged the ideals of growth.

Sustainable development, as a consensus strategy, expressly conditions the ideal of development on the ability to meet the needs of future generations. The act of consumption is part of a complex process of production, sale, use and disposal that impacts human relations and the environment on a global scale. Consuming, therefore, involves an ethical dimension and calls for social and ecological responsibility. Hence talking about sustainable consumption as one of the goals to be achieved globally.

Indeed, this work aims to analyze the existing interconnections between

postmodern society, the United Nations (UN) and sustainable consumption, with the general objective of identifying the path already taken in the global struggle for sustainability and challenges still pending.

In this perspective, the first section will explain the concept of postmodern society in the view of Zygmunt Bauman, David Harvey and Milton Santos, exposing its characteristics and its repercussions on the human condition and social structures.

Section two will briefly address the process of *dynamogenesis* of human rights and its classification in generations. After understanding sustainable consumption in the third generation, founded on the ideal of solidarity, some theoretical references that inaugurated the debate about the unsustainability of postmodern society will be studied.

Section three will detail the UN's historical struggle for a sustainable global community. In this sense, the paths taken since the Stockholm Conference of 1972 until the establishment of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda will be described.

Finally, in section four, international data on social inequalities and human impact on natural ecosystems will be presented, relating them to the challenges that postmodern society and the UN experience in terms of achieving sustainability and, particularly, sustainable consumption, a duty-right of solidarity.

1 The post-modern society, the deregulation of the global market and the pathology of consumption

Postmodern society emerges in the second half of the twentieth century and is characterized by its accelerated pace of change, the intoxicating individual freedom of choice, the deregulation of markets on a global scale, the risk and permanent state of uncertainty, in addition to the constant sense of insecurity (BAUMAN, 1998).

The phenomenon is also called “liquid modernity”, in a metaphor that alludes to the melting of the solid values that marked modern societies. For Bauman (2001, p. 12), this fluidity, typical of a scenario that now allows free flow of capital and the global market, profoundly affects “the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other”, implying the disintegration of the social network and the bankruptcy of collective defense entities.

In a 1989 work, Harvey (1992) analyzed the political-economic

transformations arising from capitalism from the 1970s onwards and, in the same sense, warned of the increased powers of flexibility and mobility that societies created in favor of capital. The geographer called *flexible accumulation* the regime that led to changes in work processes, in the market, in production and in consumption patterns, now less rigid due to the tenuous state regulation and the influx of business, technological and organizational innovations.

Harvey (1992) also noted that new experiences were transforming social life, because the new aesthetics, the postmodern one, celebrated such values as difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fleeting fads and the commercialism of culture, in order to induce needs and stimulate a high standard of consumption for the benefit of the large markets that were opening up and growing.

In fact, regarding the human condition, postmodern society creates the figure of the limitless consumer. For it, “consumption is the measure of a successful life” (BAUMAN, 1998, p. 50). From consuming so much, people become products or merchandise, and their sufferings come to result more from the superabundance of possibilities than from the existence of prohibitions. It is that “The impetus of consumption, just like the impulse of freedom, renders its own gratification impossible. We always need more freedom than we have” (BAUMAN, 1998, p. 175) and, thus, we consume wildly.

The synthesis of this process, strongly influenced by globalization and massive advertising, destroys the necessary skills for living together and mutual understanding. Busy making more money to buy more, people have less time for empathy and lasting negotiation; they are always tired and out of time (BAUMAN, 2011).

The structural factors of postmodern society impact the time-space relationship, shortening them, fostering individualism and consumerism and redesigning work ties and social relationships, which become flexible and ephemeral. This social mechanism also generates enormous inequality between rich and poor and creates space conducive to tensions and segregationist ideas (BAUMAN, 1998; 2001; 2011).

For no other reason, Bauman maintains that “‘the laws of the market’ are a poor substitute for the ‘laws of nature’ or the ‘laws of history’, let alone the ‘law of progress’” (1998, p. 247), and it is imperative that postmodern politics be guided by the “triumphant principle of Liberty, Difference and Solidarity”. The latter, solidarity, constitutes a “necessary condition [...] to the well-being of liberty and difference” and is unlikely to emerge without political intervention, since it requires firm resistance to “‘deregulatory’ and ‘privatizing’ pressures of increasingly globalized markets” (1998, p. 256).

Santos (2001) attributes to globalization a systemic perversity, insofar as it leads to structural situations of oppression, such as unemployment, poverty and hunger. According to the geographer, the narrative of a global village, which would bring instantaneous dissemination of information and homogenization to the entire planet, does not reveal the real dynamics of the process, which excludes many from the fruition of its benefits and generates deep social inequalities. The cult of consumption, which helps little or nothing in building a universal citizenship, is the uniformity that globalization encourages, warns the professor.

Finally, although the globalization process can no longer be reversed, many issues must depend on consent and the ability to resist the bias imposed on the human condition. It is that globalization brings ethical challenges, since, from it, everyone depends on one another, and the consequences of actions now have a global reach and can influence and harm people and generations that will never meet (BAUMAN, 2011).

2 The perception of society's unsustainability problem

Human rights are classified in generations, in view of their historicity¹. In the first generation, political and freedom issues are included, which demand a negative attitude from the State. In the second, social, economic and cultural aspects are inserted, which, of a provisional nature, require State action for guarantee. In the third generation, there are rights of a diffuse nature, such as development, consumer protection and a balanced environment. It can be said that, if freedom is the value that imbues the first generation and equality, the second, solidarity or fraternity guide the rights of the third generation (BONAVIDES, 2013, p. 581; ROCASOLANO; SILVEIRA, 2010, p. 201).

Since human rights are born or developed through historical conquests (BOBBIO, 2004) or the process of *dynamogenesis* (ROCASOLANO; SILVEIRA, 2010), it is important to know the paths taken for sustainable consumption to be understood as a right of solidarity. This presupposes the analysis of the birth and development of the concept of sustainability.

In this sense, it is worth mentioning some theoretical references that contributed to beginning the debate on the subject, in order to prepare the ground for, in

¹ The generations of human rights were dealt with by Vasak, in a lecture given in 1979 in Strasbourg. The theme came to be addressed by Bobbio, in *The Age of Rights*, when it became widely known. Some prefer (CANOTILHO, 2000, p. 380-381) using the word dimension over the word generation, which suggests the idea of exchanging the old for the new, when what happens is a process of coexistence and complementation.

the next topic, to analyze the historical process of struggle dynamized within the scope of the International System of Human Rights.

The unsustainability of society becomes more noticeable in the second half of the 20th century, especially due to the uncontrolled industrialization process, which begins to pollute the air and water and cause environmental disasters, such as the one resulting from the release of toxic waste by chemical industry in Minamata Bay in Japan².

A prominent position in this context is occupied by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Published in 1962, the book by the marine biologist points to the serious risk to animals and human health that the unbridled use of pesticides was causing in the United States of America (CARSON, 2010).

Shortly after Carson's warning, Garrett Hardin, a biologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, publishes *The Tragedy of the Commons*. Although it focused on the dilemma of population growth³, Hardin's 1968 article became known for its criticism of the excessive use of community assets for purely individual interests. To this end, the professor uses the metaphor of pasture open to all animal breeders, which, without any rules, soon becomes unsustainable. From this, Hardin defends the need for social arrangements that limit the freedom to use common goods, such as the goods of nature (HARDIN, 1968).

In 1973, Schumacher structured the famous work *Small is Beautiful*, translated into Portuguese as *O negócio é ser pequeno*. In it, the British economist of German origin warns of devastating human action on the environment, as he states that:

Modern man does not experience himself as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it. He even talks of a battle with nature, forgetting that, if he won the battle, he would find himself on the losing side. Until quite recently, the battle seemed to go well enough to give him the illusion of unlimited powers, but not so well as to bring the possibility of total victory into view. This has now come into view, and many people, albeit only a minority, are beginning to realize what this means for the continued existence of humanity (SCHUMACHER, 1983, p. 12).

2 From 1950 onwards, the event involved the death of fish, the illness of thousands of people and hundreds of deaths from methylmercury contamination. In 2013, the Minamata Convention on Mercury was celebrated, which was enacted in Brazil by Legislative Decree no. 9,470, of August 14, 2018.

3 Assuming a perspective already defended by Thomas Malthus, in the work *An essay on the principle of population*, published in London in 1798.

Schumacher (1983) criticizes Economics for focusing excessively on quantitative aspects and neglecting relevant qualitative inputs, such as the differences between primary goods, which man has to acquire from nature, and secondary goods, obtained from those. As the point of view is private profit, Economics equates these types of goods and, in its methodology, ends up ignoring man's dependence on the natural world. The quantitative focus implies that the economy does not detach itself from the concept of purely numerical growth, which allows the market to treat all goods with the same price tag, although the cost is essentially different between primary and secondary goods and between renewable and non-renewable primary goods.

For Schumacher (1983), differences in quality are of a meta-economic character, since they have to be identified before starting the economic analysis, as a necessary previous step to give due value to the resources of nature, which obliges the Economy to also look at the planet Earth systems. These are the words of the economist:

As economics deals with man in his environment, we may expect that meta-economics consists of two parts — one dealing with man and the other dealing with the environment. In other words, we may expect that economics must derive its aims and objectives from a study of man, and that it must derive at least a large part of its methodology from a study of nature (SCHUMACHER, 1983, p. 46).

In his essays, Schumacher (1983) emphasizes the failure to observe the laws of the universe by the production and consumption models of society at the time, which not only affect the environment, but also contribute to the unfair distribution of power and wealth. He defends the infeasibility of any human enterprise that quickly consumes its own irreplaceable capital, the Earth's resources, and advocates a change of course towards the adoption of new production methods and consumption patterns translated by a lifestyle planned to be permanent. His call to reduce consumption is strong when he says that:

Nor can the fight against pollution be successful if the patterns of production and consumption continue to be of a scale, a complexity, and a degree of violence which, as is becoming more and more apparent, do not fit into the laws of the universe, to which man is just as much subject as the rest of creation. Equally, the chance of mitigating the rate of resource depletion or of bringing harmony into the relationships between those in possession of wealth and power and those without is non-existent as long as there is no idea anywhere of enough being good and more-than-enough being of evil (SCHUMACHER, 1983, p. 313).

In general, Schumacher (1983) is critical of the culture of materialism. Focusing his thinking on ethics and the human scale, he maintains that the gigantism of organizations can have destructive effects on man and the Earth, insofar as, without adequate regulation and appropriate technology, it causes natural imbalances and social inequalities.

Schumacher's lessons (1983) are built on a framework that inaugurates global sensitivity to environmental issues and their anthropogenic⁴ impacts. According to Mebratu (1998, p. 8), although with some controversial ideas, Schumacher's vision, focused on the depletion of Earth's resources and the need for the economy to look at social and ecological aspects, fed defenders of the environment in such a way that, for some, the British economist is reputed to be the forerunner of the concept of sustainable development⁵.

Sachs also censures the reductionist view of Economics. Arguing that economic issues should be harmonized with social and ecological issues, the professor (SACHS, 2009) uses the term eco-development as early as the 1970s, based on suggestions from Maurice Strong, whom he advised in the preparations for the Stockholm Conference in 1972.

Later, the coined term will give way to the term sustainable development, whose concept will be worked on and disseminated by Sachs who, in addition to being a university professor, acts as an expert and consultant for governments and international organizations. In the long trajectory, Sachs (2009) firmly combats the ideas of growth at any cost and proposes ways for societies to be able to self-manage nature in a sensible way, in favor of the well-being of current and future generations, an imperative of synchronic and diachronic solidarity.

Defender of a political economy, beyond just an ecological economy⁶, Sachs (2009) highlights that, if it is up to the natural sciences to say what is necessary for a sustainable world, it is up to the social sciences to articulate the strategies towards this goal, something which requires touching on sensitive issues such as

⁴ Induced or altered by the presence and activity of human beings.

⁵ It is worth noting that, in 1970, the Romanian scientist and economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen was already developing the question of ecology within the economy, as Serge Latouche recalls in his book *Small Treaty of Peaceful De-Growth*. Nicholas's work is called *The Law of Entropy and the Economic Process*.

⁶ Equally contrary to traditional economics, a proposal that seeks to reconcile political economy and ecological economics was developed by Leff (2015) in the mid-1990s. For the Mexican economist, the environmental movement and social struggles in search of better quality of life and sustainable conditions bring about a new dynamic that can be called the *social reappropriation of nature*, which is concerned with ecological distribution, environmental justice and cultural autonomy, that is, it deepens in issues of equity.

the profound inequalities existing between North and South.

Also in the 1970s, Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jorgen Randers and William Behrens II, scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), publish *The Limits to Growth* report. The work, destined for the Club of Rome, concludes that, if production and consumption trends and population growth are maintained, the planet's capacity would be exhausted in a short time, as summarized below:

If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.

It is possible to alter these growth trends and to establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future. The state of global equilibrium could be designed so that the basic material needs of each person on earth are satisfied and each person has an equal opportunity to realize his individual human potential (MEADOWS *et al.*, 1972, p. 1).

The scientific report ends by warning about the need to set limits to growth so that society respects the Earth's capacity and lasts for generations. The imperative of transition was clear in these sayings:

If there is cause for deep concern, there is also cause for hope. Deliberately limiting growth would be difficult, but not impossible. The way to proceed is clear, and the necessary steps, although they are new ones for human society, are well within human capabilities. Man possesses, for a small moment in his history, the most powerful combination of knowledge, tools, and resources the world has ever known. He has all that is physically necessary to create a totally new form of human society—one that would be built to last for generations. The two missing ingredients are a realistic, long-term goal that can guide mankind to the equilibrium society and the human will to achieve that goal. Without such a goal and a commitment to it, short-term concerns will generate the exponential growth that drives the world system toward the limits of the earth and ultimate collapse. With that goal and that commitment, mankind would be ready now to begin a controlled, orderly transition from growth to global equilibrium (MEADOWS *et al.*, 1972, p. 9).

In the same year as the report presented to the Club of Rome, the UN promoted the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, initiating a broader discussion of the subject at the international level.

3 The UN and the fight for sustainability

Stockholm was the first global initiative to raise and debate the human impact on the environment. By convening the conference, the UN aimed to build guidelines for States to protect and preserve the environment, as suggested by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

In 1972, the Stockholm Declaration was approved with 26 common principles, which, in summary, relate a dignified life and human well-being to the right to a quality environment; highlight the right of present and future generations to preserve natural resources; preach the rational ordering of the use of nature and the importance of science and technology to discover, avoid and combat environmental risks; recommend efforts for environmental education, stressing the responsibility of companies and the mass media; and emphasize international cooperation in environmental matters.

In addition, the Declaration emphasizes that the challenges of protecting the environment are different between developed and developing countries, as the former have issues resulting from industrialization and technological development and the latter experience problems linked to underdevelopment and the absence of minimum standards of decent living. That is why some common principles, such as no. 9, 10, 11, 12, 20 and 23, aim to address this inequality. The directives guide that developed countries must provide assistance and share knowledge and technology to developing countries, while these may have differentiated levels of environmental protection, more tenuous than the international consensus recommends, in view of the high social cost imposed. The so-called common responsibility, but differentiated across the States, is taken care of.

Despite being a *soft law*⁷, *without binding effect like a treaty, the Stockholm Declaration was extremely important for environmental visibility and engagement*⁸.

As a product of Stockholm, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), was also created, with the mission of determining the global environmental agenda and providing leadership and partnerships in the protection of the environment.

In 1980, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) published the report *World conservation strategy: living resource conservation for sustainable development*. Dedicated to designing a long term environmental conservation

⁷ For more information on *soft law* norms, see Campello and Reis (2018).

⁸ It resulted in the establishment of environmental ministries and agencies in more than 100 countries and the beginning of the explosive growth in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to environmental protection and related issues (LENS; NATH, 2003, p. 11).

strategy, the work conceptualizes development as “the modification of the biosphere and the application of human, financial, living and non-living resources to satisfy human needs” (IUCN, 1980), while limiting it to economic, social and ecological dimensions of sustainability (ch. 1, item 3). In chapter 20, consumption in developed or affluent societies, in contrast to situations of serious scarcity in less favored countries, receives attention in these terms:

In many parts of the world population pressures are making demands on resources beyond the capacity of those resources to sustain. Every country should have a conscious population policy to avoid as far as possible the spread of such situations, and eventually to achieve a balance between numbers and environment. At the same time, it is essential that the affluent constrain their demands on resources, and preferably reduce them, shifting some of their wealth to assisting the deprived. To a significant extent the survival and future of the poor depends on conservation and sharing by the rich.

In 1982, Stockholm+10 takes place in Nairobi, Kenya, leading to the establishment of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). In 1983, the UN ordered a report to the CMMAD, chaired by Gro H. Brundtland. In 1987, *Our Common Future* was published, also called *The Brundtland Report*, in honor of the Prime Minister of Norway who presided over the work.

According to *Our Common Future* (1987, p. 5), “Industrial production has grown more than fiftyfold over the past century, four-fifths of this growth since 1950”, with profound impacts upon the biosphere and Earth’s regeneration capacity. This scale of industrial growth, which has also taken place in developing countries, creates new links between the global economy and global ecology, demanding international cooperative solutions, in addition to strong internal attitudes from the States, says the report. The work also reinforces the need for financial and technical assistance to less developed countries, because everyone, rich and poor, big and small, needs to undertake changes towards sustainable development.

The *Brundtland* Commission defines sustainable development as “s development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, an open concept that contains two key elements: (1) needs, which must be met with absolute priority for the protection of the world’s poor; and (2) limiting technology and social structures to the capacity of the environment to meet present and future needs. As seen, social (poverty reduction) and ecological (environment improvement) factors are

strongly intertwined in this definition (MEBRATU, 1998, p. 501-502).

In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as Earth Summit, Eco-92 or Rio-92, was held.⁹ From there comes Agenda 21, a global action program with 40 chapters. In item 4.3, it is observed that production and consumption patterns, especially those of industrialized countries, are the main cause of continuous environmental degradation, and it is warned that economic growth, accelerated by globalization, has had an unfair and uneven impact in various parts of the world, with worsening poverty and hunger in developing countries (UN, 1995).

Agenda 21 represented a consensus that developed countries should lead the way in promoting more sustainable consumption patterns. This topic is controversial in view of the environmental conflict that exists between countries in the Northern and Southern hemispheres. In the sustainability debate, the North often blames the South for overpopulation and the South blames the North for overconsumption. In a more extreme view, sustainable development is seen as a way of denying developing countries the same lifestyle and consumption levels enjoyed by developed countries.

Eco-92 also resulted in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development with 27 principles; the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification; the Convention on Biological Diversity; the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in addition to the Declaration of Principles on Forest Use.

Establishing extremely relevant principles, such as precaution and prior study of the environmental impact, the Rio Declaration also warns that it is up to the States to reduce and eliminate unsustainable production and consumption systems (principle 8) and establishes that national authorities must make use of economic instruments, in addition to encouraging the internalization of environmental costs in the process of forming market prices, in order to demand that the person causing the contamination bears its respective rehabilitation costs, considering the public interest, but without distorting trade and international investments (principle 16 – polluter pays).

Despite not having obtained a *hard law* for environmental protection, Rio-92 left the preparation process itself as a great legacy, which began in 1989 and promoted four meetings in different parts of the world, which provided visibility

⁹ It should be noted that the word “Development” is now inserted in the name of the Conference, which reflects the affirmation of a historic process crowned with the 1987 Brundtland Report and the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (Res. 41/128).

to the concept of sustainable development, causing people from different regions of the globe to start asking what this means, how it can be put into practice and whether it is already on its way (MEDRATU, p. 502).

According to Sanchés and Croal (2012), although without anything binding to address the challenge of choosing sustainable political paths, it is undeniable that Rio-92 contributed to the international scenario, mainly because it is from there that the environmental impact assessment instrument starts to be foreseen or improved in the legislation of many countries.

In 1997, the UN met to identify obstacles to the implementation of Agenda 21 and define priorities for action, an assessment known as Rio+5. Shortly afterwards, in 1999, the UN expanded its consumer protection guidelines, initially established in 1985 by Resolution 39/248, to include sustainable consumption strongly adhered to the rights of education and adequate information. It is important to mention the following topics of the new guidelines, also an international *soft law*:

29. Consumer access to accurate information about the environmental impact of products and services should be encouraged through such means as product profiles, environmental reports by industry, 14 information centers for consumers, voluntary and transparent ecolabeling programs and product information hotlines.

30. Member States, in close collaboration with manufacturers, distributors and consumer organizations, should take measures regarding misleading environmental claims or information in advertising and other marketing activities. The development of appropriate advertising codes and standards for the regulation and verification of environmental claims should be encouraged.

45. Member States should encourage consumer organizations and other interested groups, including the media, to undertake education and information programmes, including on the environmental impacts of consumption patterns and on the possible implications, including benefits and costs, of changes in consumption, particularly for the benefit of low-income consumer groups in rural and urban areas.

In 2000, the UN approved the Millennium Declaration with eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015. MDG no. 7 is linked to the guarantee of environmental sustainability, and no. 8 is linked to the execution of a global partnership for development. Also in 2000¹⁰, the Earth

10 In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development requested the creation of a charter containing the fundamental principles for sustainable development. The preparation of the Earth Charter was one of the unfinished business of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. In 1994, Maurice Strong, secretary general of the Earth Summit and president of the Earth Council, and Mikhail Gorbachev, president of Green Cross International, launched a new Earth Charter initiative with the support of the US government. The Earth Charter Commission was formed in 1997 to oversee the project. After years of consultation and preparation, the Earth Charter is launched in June 2000.

Charter was launched, a declaration of ethical principles considered fundamental for the 21st century in the search for a sustainable, just and peaceful community. The Earth Charter represents a major step forward in exalting the principle of respect and care for the community of life and the value of ecological integrity.

In 2002, Johannesburg hosted the UN Conference called the World Summit on Sustainable Development or Rio+10, with the objective of analyzing the progress of Agenda 21. Like Rio-92, Rio+10 is preceded by a long process of preparation, with meetings in various parts of the globe, reasons why it fosters expectations of great advances.

However, the Johannesburg Declaration, the main product of Rio+10, practically reaffirms the principles already celebrated in Stockholm and Rio-92 and brings very little in new terms. As the commitment to sustainable development had already been assumed in Agenda 21, the focus was on how to implement and monitor this ideal. In this sense, emphasis was placed on corporate responsibility, with debates on the possibility of international agreements or treaties, public-private partnerships and new national regulations, in addition to mandatory eco-labeling, to achieve more sustainable production and consumption methods. But the United States refused to assume any of these specific commitments and, together with Australia, were against the adoption of goals to increase energy from renewable sources (SEYFANG, 2003, p. 226).

The draft Johannesburg Declaration contained 69 articles, but only 37 were actually approved. Overall, the document indicates that threats to the environment have grown over the last ten years; points out the current challenges for implementing sustainable development, sharpened with the advent of the globalization process; admits the importance of a multi-level, long-term policy with broad participation to respond to these challenges; and reinforces the use of environmental policy instruments, as well as the need for capacity building, training, education, technology transfer and other important actions (HENS; NATH, 2003, p. 22). Of particular relevance is the express mention of corporate responsibility through the following principles:

27. We agree that in pursuit of its legitimate activities the private sector, including both large and small companies, has a duty to contribute to the evolution of equitable and sustainable communities and societies.

28. We also agree to provide assistance to increase income-generating employment opportunities, taking into account the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work of the International Labor Organization.

29. We agree that there is a need for private sector corporations to enforce corporate accountability, which should take place within a transparent and stable regulatory environment.

Together with the Johannesburg Declaration, an implementation plan for Agenda 21 is approved. Changing unsustainable consumption and production patterns is included in Chapter III, which provides for a range of actions, such as consumer education and information, the use of eco-efficiency and cleaner production practices, in addition to life cycle analysis based on scientific knowledge. According to Hens and Nath (2003, p. 24 and 38), central themes of the chapter were objects of great disagreement, such as renewable energy, energy subsidies and chemical and health products, which makes questionable the world's ability to really walk towards sustainability through the assumption of concrete obligations by governments and companies.

Finally, in Johannesburg, there is a considerable mismatch between the discourse and the will of the States and the corporate sector to celebrate effective sustainable commitments.

The same conclusion is found at Rio+20. The world was responding to the 2009 crisis and, also because of this, few were willing to assume obligations. In preparation for the event, held in Rio de Janeiro, the objective of adjusting binding international standards is discarded, but only aims to renew and/or revise sustainable development commitments and identify implementation gaps. Consequently, in 2012, Rio+20 discussed issues on green economy, productive sector efficiency and poverty eradication again without a clear and concrete strategy for political action (GUIMARÃES; FONTOURA, 2012, p. 25-27).

The Rio+20 Declaration, called *The Future We Want*, lists 283 items about consensus in the pursuit of sustainable development, but which do not address specific obligations. The theme of consumption and production is provided for in three topics, namely:

224. We recall the commitments made in the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation on sustainable consumption and production and, in particular, the request in chapter III of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation to encourage and promote the development of a ten-year framework of programs. We recognize that fundamental changes in the way societies consume and produce are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development.

225. Countries reaffirm the commitments they have made to phase out harmful and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption and undermine sustainable development. We invite others to consider rationalizing inefficient fossil fuel subsidies by removing market distortions, including restructuring taxation and phasing out harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reject their environmental impacts, with such policies taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries, with the aim of minimizing the possible adverse impacts on their development and in a manner that protects the poor and the affected communities.

226. We adopt the ten-year framework of programs on sustainable consumption and production patterns, and highlight the fact that the programs included in the framework are voluntary. We invite the General Assembly, at its sixty-seventh session, to designate a Member State body to take any necessary steps to fully operationalize the framework.

Perhaps the greatest fruit of Rio+20 was the articulation to build the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Topics 245 to 251 of *The Future We Want* deal with exactly that. The working group that was created for the task presents its final report to the UN in 2014, with the suggestion of 17 new goals (now SDGs) and 169 specific goals to be monitored and achieved by 2030.

Launched in 2015, the UN Agenda 2030 was born with 17 SDGs and 169 targets and inaugurates “a new paradigm for a more balanced model of sustainable development with the strengthening of environmental protection”. The agenda is concerned with “combating inequalities and discrimination, so that ‘no one is left behind’”, and those who are further behind are given priority attention (CAMPELLO, 2020, p. 25-26).

Covering both social problems such as poverty, hunger, decent work and quality education, and ecological problems such as clean energy, life in water and on land and sustainable consumption and production, in an indivisible and interdependent way, the 2030 Agenda stipulates concrete procedural and material conducts. The former consist of instrumental duties such as providing access to environmental information provided for in target 12.8¹¹ or facilitating public participation in the environmental decision-making processes provided for in target 16.7¹²; on the other hand, material obligations directly protect human rights, such as the right to health, guaranteed by target 3.9, as it stipulates, “by 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination” (CAMPELLO, 2020, p. 34-38).

In this context, it is important to highlight SDG 12, with the theme “responsible consumption and production”, in addition to target 12.5, whose intention is to substantially reduce waste by reducing consumption by 2030. This goal, by all evidence, has a direct impact on the habits of postmodern society.

Finally, the 2030 Agenda represents an important step forward by pointing out more precise paths to sustainable development and demanding the production

11 “By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature”.

12 “Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”.

and monitoring of data; however, it is also true that it is not endowed with coercive or binding force, which keeps the international human rights protection system still weak.

4 The need to revisit postmodern society and global governance

Current scientific knowledge makes it possible to monitor the impact of human activities on the environment. However, these metrics have not shown the necessary evolution in terms of sustainability. Some indicators deserve mention.

There is enormous difficulty in preventing global warming and controlling climate impacts. Although the Montreal Protocol (1987), the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and now the Paris Agreement (2015) set targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change¹³ (IPCC, 2022) indicates that anthropogenic emissions, induced by humans, have increased by 12% since 2010 and 54% since 1990. Hence, in order to meet the target of the Paris Agreement, which aims to maintain the increase in global temperature at up to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, emissions will have to stop growing by 2025 and fall by 43% by 2030.

In addition to being ecologically abusive, such emissions reflect a geography of social inequality. According to Gore (2021), people in the richest 1% of the global population are set to have per capita consumption emissions footprints in 2030 that are still 25% higher than in 1990, 16 times higher than the global average, and 30 times higher than the global per capita level compatible with the 1.5°C goal, while the footprints of the poorest half of the global population are set to remain well below the 1.5 °C-compatible level. In a similar sense, the IPCC (2022, p. 13) points out that “least developed countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have much lower per capita emissions (1.7 tCO₂-eq and 4.6 tCO₂-eq, respectively) than the global average (6.9 tCO₂-eq), excluding CO₂-LULUCF”.

On the other hand, there is the serious problem of excessive consumption of plastic. According to the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), soils, fresh waters and oceans are contaminated with macro, micro and nanoplastics and it is estimated that 104 million metric tons of plastic will be consumed by 2030. Nanoplastics are ingested by means of food and clean water, and the full consequences of this ingestion are not yet known, but it is known that plastic pollution

¹³ The IPCC is the UN body that assesses science related to climate change, bringing together experts from around the world.

kills wildlife, damages ecosystems and pollutes the atmosphere. However, there is a lack of a global systematic approach demanding from the producer the responsibility for the entire life cycle of plastic, whose manufacture has become less costly and has proliferated in recent times¹⁴.

Here, too, the geography of affluent countries prevails, since almost half of all plastic is used in the creation of disposable products and most of these products are consumed in high or upper-middle income countries (WWF, 2019, p. 8, 10, 12 and 14). A more recent study by the WWF (2022) accurately indicates the adverse effects that plastic pollution has caused in the oceans, estimating that plastic debris should quadruple by 2050, if there is no change in modeling in the current system.

It should be noted that humanity has already crossed the safe operational space of the process of introducing new entities (PERSSON *et al.*, 2022), which includes plastic, as well as having already transgressed the safe limits of five other self-regulating processes of resilience and development. balance of the Earth System: climate change; the integrity of the biosphere; interference with global nitrogen and phosphorus cycles; the global use of green water; and changes in land use (ROCKSTRÖM *et al.*, 2009; STEFFEN *et al.*, 2015; WANG-ERLANDSSON *et al.*, 2022).

Other relevant data are the planet's ecological footprint and biocapacity, calculated by York University, in partnership with the Global Footprint Network. The ecological footprint indicates, in hectares, the portion of land and water that a person or society uses on average to sustain itself, while the biocapacity index represents the amount of natural resources available, respecting their regeneration process. In this sense, it appears that, since 1971, humanity's ecological footprint exceeds the planet's biocapacity; in 2018, this was surpassed by 75%. In global terms, it is estimated that the population already uses an average of 50% more of the available resources, which quickly depletes the natural capital, which loses its capacity for renewal. The world average is 2.7 global hectares per person, while the planet's available biocapacity is only 1.8 hectares. And projections for 2050 estimate that two planets would be necessary, if the consumption pattern is maintained (GLOBAL FOOTPRINT NETWORK, 2022; THE NATIONAL FOOTPRINT..., 2022).

¹⁴ It is necessary to force, at all levels, to improve the management of this waste, with the creation and implementation of reuse and recycling methods, in addition to reducing production and consumption to acceptable limits. The operating costs of plastic recycling are high and have made the activity economically unfeasible. Hence the need for adequate regulatory treatment, because the excess of this material, without strong regulation and inspection, also leads to the risk of incineration, producing more pollution (WWF, 2019).

Furthermore, it is estimated that 90% of biodiversity loss and water stress are caused by excessive extraction and processing of natural resources, according to the report *Building resilient societies after the Covid-19 pandemic* (IPCC, 2020).

Ultimately, this tragic scenario indicates that it is the rich who pollute the most and make the achievement of the Paris target and the SDGs unattainable. In fact, it is they, or rather their multinationals, who, according to Bauman, dictate patterns of hyperconsumption to global society.

Obviously, social inequality is not just “in the footprints”. It stems from a structural abyss in the distribution of income on the planet. The Oxfam report *Inequality kills* (AHMED *et al.*, 2022) points out that the world’s ten richest men more than doubled their fortunes from \$700 billion to \$1.5 trillion — at a rate of \$15,000 per second or \$1.3 billion a day— during the first two years of a pandemic. On the other hand, the incomes of 99 percent of humanity fall and over 160 million more people forced into poverty. According to the survey, this inequality is contributing to the death of at least 21,000 people each day, or one person every four seconds, if factors such as lack of access to public health, gender violence, hunger and the climate crisis are taken into account.

Thus, there is an unfair system that feeds back, whose interconnections urgently need to be changed. It is this piece of reality that justifies, moreover, sustaining that sustainable consumption is a right and a human duty¹⁵ of solidarity under construction, in the perspective that significant challenges in terms of its effectiveness still persist.

And these challenges demand reflection, among other topics, on the role of global governance, on the role of the economy and on the role of society and human beings themselves.

With regard to global governance, despite the strong appeal summarized in the civil society declaration (RESTAURAR..., 2022), it was not now at Stockholm+50, held in Sweden in June 2022, that an internationally binding legal instrument was obtained, although resulting speeches underlined “the urgent need for bold and deliberate actions as well as clear political will to [...] strengthen the multilateral system, increase ambition and solidarity” (UNEP, 2022).

Therefore, the historical process of struggle for complete solidarity endures. Some proposals already defended a strong international system, such as the

¹⁵ As a rule, the right corresponds to the other side of the duty and, in the case of diffuse goods, such as the third generation ones, are all, at the same time, holders of rights and duties. Legal entities, by the way, have a special duty to protect the environment; must guarantee the sustainability of production and consumption, either because they exploit natural resources (companies), or because they govern such resources (National States and International Organizations made up of Member States).

Draft Global Compact for the Environment developed in 2017, and The Hague Principles of 2018 for a Universal Declaration on Responsibilities for Human Rights and Earth Trusteeship.

Last year, the UN Secretary-General, in the report *Our Common Agenda* (UN, 2021), promised to ask “a High-level Advisory Board, led by former Heads of State and Government, to identify global public goods and other areas of common interest where governance improvements are most needed”. This advisory board was created in 2022 and will present subsidies for the Future Summit to be held in 2023.

Hopefully a new model of global governance, with a different multilateralism and complete or real solidarity, may result from this work. The contemporary world, deregulated, fast, complex and multifaceted, requires rethinking the governance of Earth’s assets. The social and ecological damage created by the current system requires a new design of democracy, sovereignty and protection of human rights. A cosmopolitan and unprecedented model in history, which is strong but, at the same time, knows how to coordinate actions in various policy domains, producing synergy.

An example may well illustrate the importance of what is being said.

According to the IPCC, digital technologies (internet of things, robotics and artificial intelligence) can help mitigate climate change, but their gains will be nullified if the demand for goods and services grows due to the use of digital devices. It is that, by increasing consumption, there would be an increase in electronic waste. Furthermore, the use of such technologies could have serious repercussions on the labor market and on the digital divide already installed in society. So, digital technologies, in order to decarbonize the atmosphere, need to be properly governed, in order to inhibit or reduce the side effects of their use. A fair transitional regime that guarantees employment must be created in the course of structural change from high to low carbon economy, as “Ambitious mitigation pathways imply large and sometimes disruptive changes in economic structure, with significant distributional consequences, within and between countries” (IPCC, 2022, p. 15; 47).

Consequently, a duly controlled change of course is essential in order to ensure the well-being of current and future generations and to guarantee equity in the distribution of resources and the equilibrium of planet Earth. Human rights such as life, health, physical and moral integrity, food result from this instrumental commitment.

Interestingly, the IPCC (2022, p. 46) warns that “even if extensive global

mitigation efforts are implemented, there will be a large need for financial, technical, and human resources for adaptation”, with a view to achieving climate justice. In this context, it seems evident that the future governance of the Earth will have to consider that the main protagonists in the emission of pollutants and in obtaining profits in the international market must contribute to a greater extent to this grand task.

Thus, although the 2030 Agenda is broad and encourages the implementation of SDGs at the local level, technical and complex issues remain that require a strong governance approach on a global scale, in order to fill gaps in matters that States are weak or unable to address, as with the issue of climate responsibility. These systemic pressures generate risks of inaction of the 2030 Agenda at the domestic level (DENNY; CASTRO; MAXIAO YAN, 2017).

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that, based on a discursive change, increasing works have focused on considerations of justice to manage the human impacts caused to the Earth System (RAWORTH, 2019). Imbued with this purpose, in 2023, a group of natural and social scientists took on the challenge of addressing planetary boundaries in conjunction with sensitive issues such as basic and universal access to food, water, energy and infrastructure. The intention was to open the debate on what would be the fair limits of human load for each self-regulating process on Earth, along with the safe boundaries already stipulated by the natural sciences (GUPTA *et al.*, 2023).

Discussing minimum universal access to food, water, energy and infrastructure (housing and transport) involves questions of equity in the distribution of the planet’s natural resources, which also suggests a binding legal approach on a global scale.

But, alongside strong global governance, it is necessary to make society and human beings aware of their transforming role. The ecological and social crises can receive strong help if we revisit people’s life habits and understanding of nature. Changing consumption patterns, especially of the richest, can interfere with greenhouse gas emissions, generating a reduction of 40–70% by 2050 (IPCC, 2022). Habits such as walking and cycling, avoiding long-haul flights, and using energy more efficiently in buildings are examples of mitigation measures. But one cannot, finally, neglect the greatest power that society has (which is independent of science and technology), which is to reduce consumption levels, adapting them to what is necessary for a good life.

The diffusion of solidarity economy can also reduce the solidarity deficit of postmodern society. Structured in response to needs that the neoliberal capitalist

system has difficulty solving, especially the high unemployment rate and poverty, solidarity economy proposes alternatives for generating work and income for the excluded (SINGER, 2001). It introduces an ethical dimension to consumption, trade, production, services, finance and technology relations, prioritizing cooperation, self-management, human well-being, gender equity and ecosystem balance, among other values (MANCE, 2005).

Organized in collaborative networks, the solidarity economy is based on self-management, does not allow labor exploitation and market domination, in addition to demanding the preservation of ecosystems and the sharing of surpluses in solidarity funds. Community production groups, cooperatives and production associations; self-management of companies by workers; local exchange systems, certification and labeling organizations; solidarity financing; critical and solidarity consumption and solidarity acquisition groups; economy of communion; and dissemination of free software and free and sustainable technologies are some examples of solidarity economy practices that can indicate a new path designed to respect human dignity and the dynamic balance of the planet (MANCE, 2005).

Conclusion

Widely implementing sustainable consumption is still a major challenge that, among other related issues, requires rethinking postmodern society, global governance of the Earth's goods, and economic practices.

Consuming sustainably presupposes respect for current and future generations' right to have their basic needs met, which includes the right to a balanced environment.

It turns out that postmodern society encourages hyperconsumption. It appears in the 1970s, induced by political-economic changes that transform work processes, market, production and consumption patterns. Everything becomes more mobile and more flexible. The State, in turn, exerting less influence on the economy and social relations, allows a large accumulation of capital by transnational corporations.

In order to sustain the new dynamic, with a global reach, narratives and needs are created that make human beings more individualistic and generate a deficit of solidarity that feeds structural situations of social inequality, such as unemployment, poverty and hunger.

It is also around the emergence of postmodern society that environmental awareness in the world is expanding, in response to the growth of industrial

activity that, without control, already pollutes the air and water and causes disasters. Soon scholars begin to warn that human activities require limits and the ideal of sustainable development starts to be defended.

Since 1972, the UN has conducted activities with a view to advancing environmental protection and sustainability. In five decades of struggle, many achievements have taken place, especially the incorporation of a balanced environment into the domestic law of hundreds of countries, but many challenges are still pending. Although the current 2030 Agenda provides for 17 SDGs and 169 targets, covering a multitude of subjects, it is still a non-binding instrument.

Current data that measure the planet's degradation warn that humanity has already transgressed six of the nine planetary boundaries, which affects the Earth System's resilience. The data also indicate that anthropogenic CO² emissions, which cause global warming, originate, in large part, from the richest, who also have a higher consumption pattern. And, in addition to this geography of ecological inequality, the data also point to a geography of social inequality, given the structural gap in the planet's income distribution, which was amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This scenario indicates the existence of an unfair system that feeds back, whose interconnections urgently need to be changed. To this end, a first and important step is the signing of an international treaty to manage ecosystems, common goods of humanity. But despite increasing pressure from civil society and international organizations, this is still a big struggle. Stockholm+50, in 2022, did not succeed in strengthening global governance in this regard.

Another important step is to revisit the hyperconsumption of postmodern society, from the understanding of the implications that each act of consumption brings to the balance of the planet. In addition to cultivating more sustainable habits, it is also necessary to reduce consumption levels, adapting them to what is necessary for a good life.

Finally, another relevant path is the greater dissemination of solidarity economy practices, which articulate work and income solutions for people excluded from the current economic system, prioritizing cooperation, self-management, human well-being and the sustainable use of natural resources.

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Participation of the Authors

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