Sustainability through People, Mindset, and Culture

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In modern times, when short-term survival appears to be a granted thing for humans, our focus has been on making progress riding on waves of science, technology, and our never-ending quest for being better and superior. In this race, we are losing sight of the critical need for capabilities, means, and ends to be sustainable. In a global society, achieving inclusive and sustainable growth can be made possible by focusing on the key pillars of—people, culture, and mindset. People through their actions, the culture of sustainability by binding us together in this journey, and a mindset that brings focus on keeping sustainability at the center of every thought, idea, and perspective that gets developed and brought into action, can directly impact sustainability. This paper attempts to examine the role that the suggested framework with dimensions—people, culture, and mindset can play in achieving inclusive and sustainable growth.

Keywords: *sustainability, people, culture, mindset, framework*

Introduction

Sustainability is an important concept not just as an area of study, but it is important to absorb it as a way of life. For human beings to survive as a species, we need to sustain multi-dimensionally. Biologically, humans are smart species which can sustain themselves because of the natural selection process. However, other dimensions of sustainability like economic sustainability which focuses on bringing quality to life and ecological sustainability which is focused on maintaining the possibility of life on the planet Earth results in complexities and many times involves trade-off. This trade-off may have issues, benefits, and repercussions in

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the short run or may go into the long run and thus may not be visible immediately. This adds to the already complex and overlapping goal system that we follow to attain sustainable objectives. To overcome the challenges, we need to first recognize the areas involved and then categorize and see how these goals are interdependent, correlated, and overlap with each other, not forgetting the time dimension to it. Three identified pillars of sustainable development—social, economic, and environment cannot be achieved in isolation and should not be viewed as separate and independent of each other. They are overlapping and intermingling. The need of an hour is to understand this complex web to the minutest of details and then to design and apply a comprehensive approach that has the capability to bring results in all the dimensions together.

A sustainable goal is to have a society where human beings in the present and future can have access to the basics of life. A society which is healthy, peaceful, just, stable, and equitable is desired not just for the present but also for the future. It is a dream to have a progressive and healthy society that works on the pillars of technology and economic activities which do not drain natural resources but rather support and replenish the available resources for future generations. We need an approach where waste is no longer considered a waste, rather it can be changed and utilized as a resource. As of now, we can adopt two prong approaches—one to stop and control the damage that has already been done, and second to investigate avenues so that we have alternative routes to flourish and prosper both in the short run and the long run—for current as well as future generations. For this, we must address and involve multiple agencies and entities to take sustainability as a significant issue. It should involve government, corporations, institutions such as schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, hotels, businesses, and finally individuals and households.

Traditional main driver of economic growth was the profit which often came at the cost of ecology or equity. Environmental protection and integrity are as important as just and equitable growth. This paper is an attempt to design a framework which is inclusive and holistic in approach. The proposed framework is based on three fundamental and important pillars that are people, mindset, and culture. These three pillars are effective as well as efficient in achieving equity, maintaining ecological integrity, and to have economic growth. Multiple institutions and agencies should be integrated under this framework but the focus or the end goal is to maneuver people, the mindset, and the culture towards sustainability.

Rationale and Methodology

Sustainability is not just about adopting eco-friendly technologies or complying with regulations; it encompasses a broader set of principles that encompass environmental, social, and economic considerations. At its core, sustainability requires a mindset that values long-term thinking, holistic problem-solving, and a commitment to continuous improvement. This mindset serves as the foundation upon which sustainable practices and behaviors are built. However, mindset alone

is not sufficient to drive meaningful change. One must acknowledge the pivotal role of "people" in translating sustainability principles into action as it is people who implement sustainable practices, innovate new solutions, and champion sustainability initiatives. With the role of mindset and people coming to the fore as important ingredients to sustainability, they are still focused on individuality in thinking and actions. When there is a need to transform these actions onto a wider scale for effective executions and outcomes, culture serves as the glue that binds together mindset and people, shaping behaviors, norms, and values. An open culture is more likely to support sustainability whereas, a culture characterized by resistance to change, or short-term thinking may pose a barrier to sustainability (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2021). This paper aims to establish a conceptual framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness of mindset, people, and culture in fostering sustainability in all walks of life.

An extensive literature review is conducted to explore the existing research supporting the need and relation between mindset, people, and culture in achieving sustainability. Recognizing the limitations of existing literature, which often discusses these pillars in isolation, this study adopts an integrated approach to provide a holistic understanding of their collective impact. The study involves the development of a conceptual framework that synthesizes insights from existing literature on sustainability, mindsets, and culture. Drawing upon key theoretical perspectives, this framework elucidates the interrelationships between mindset, people, and culture, highlighting their roles as essential drivers of sustainability. At the same time, this paper proposes to recognize the importance and need of considering all three aspects simultaneously, to harness their potential synergies in achieving sustainability. Through iterative refinement and validation, the conceptual framework serves as a guiding framework for subsequent data collection and analysis.

Literature Review

The review was guided by studies on sustainability and sustainable development. According to Basiago (1999), sustainability means the capacity to maintain an entity, outcome, or process over time. Stoddart et al. (2011) define sustainability as the efficient and equitable distribution of resources intra-generationally and inter-generationally with the operation of socio-economic activities within the confines of a finite ecosystem. On the other hand, Ben-Eli (2015), sees sustainability as a dynamic equilibrium in the process of interaction between the population and the carrying capacity of its environment such that the population develops to express its full potential without producing irreversible adverse effects on the carrying capacity of the environment upon which it depends. Continuing the thought, Thomas (2015) says that sustainability brings into focus human activities and their ability to satisfy human needs and wants without depleting or exhausting the productive resources at their disposal. Development literature uses the concept of sustainability in the context of human development through

the improvement of healthy economic, social, and ecological systems (Mensah & Enu-Kwesi, 2018; Milne & Gray, 2013; Thomas, 2015; Tjarve & Zemīte, 2016).

As per Dernbach (1998), Lele (1991), and Stoddart et al. (2011), sustainable development would simply mean "development that can be continued either indefinitely or for the given time period". There are multiple ways and thus multiple definitions of the concept of sustainable development. As per the Brundtland Commission Report, which is also the most cited definition (Schaefer & Crane, 2005), sustainable development (SD) is the development that meets the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

According to Gossling-Goidsmiths (2018) and Zhai and Chang (2019), sustainable development goals are achieving social progress, environmental equilibrium, and economic growth. Exploring the demands of SD, Ukaga, Maser, and Reichenbach (2011) tried to explore the demands of sustainable development and thus stressed the necessity to move away from harmful socio-economic activities and rather engage in activities with positive environmental, economic, and social impacts.

Yeung (2019), has tried to review diverse ways of promoting a SD mindset to engage employees and management to become future sustainability leaders. In this study, the author tried to present a model for promoting a Sustainable Development Mindset with employee CSR policy/consumer data protection relayed social policy for advancing quality management (QM). Wicks, Keevil, and Parmar (2012), in their study, said that managerial mindsets play a key role in enhancing or inhibiting the ability of corporations to manage in an environmentally sustainable way. El-Kafafi (P-207), in his book chapter—Building a Sustainable Mindset, advocates the importance of building a sustainable mindset by considering developing people and organizations so that sustainable thinking and behavior is a natural and ongoing part of an organization's life. According to Bartunek (1988), Global mindset development can be viewed as a process of reframing a cognitive reference point, shifting a worldview, or developing a new paradigm of meaning or perspective-taking. On the other hand, Ndum and Onukwugha (2012) discussed the need for and importance of a Global mindset of leaders/managers, teams, individuals, and the entire African populace to enhance global sustainability. Pokholkov, Horvat, Quadrado, Chervach, and Zaitseva (2020), in their paper, underline the importance of fostering the SD mindset of engineering students, as well as the need for the formation and development of a specific SD environment at universities. They stressed training socially responsible students with a SD mindset.

Former United Nations Secretary General–Kofi Annan, in his 21st-century action plan, said, "We must put people at the center of everything we do". Social sustainability implies that people matter since development is about people (Benaim, Collins, & Raftis, 2008). While proposing a set of characteristics of the process for eliminating barriers that stop people from meeting their needs, the authors highlight that people's needs are at the center of sustainability issues.

In the context of human society, no single individual will be able to solve the problem but rather it will be combined incremental steps taken by communities at large. As individuals, we make choices about our activities and inevitably, they involve choices about resource consumption (Steve Cohen, 2021). He argues that while the individual and collective responsibilities to sustainability are connected, in the absence of collective systems and infrastructure required to support sustainability, there are extremely limited outcomes that an individual can attain. Going by the scale of changes required to achieve sustainability, systematic changes are needed. But for any systematic change to be effective or even to exist, individuals should understand the need for change and be active agents of the change. Similarly, the chapter "Individual action" in the book–Sustainability Methods and Perspectives (work guided by Professor Vanessa Levesque, Sustainability Dual Major, UNH), highlights the role an individual plays through his/her actions on the path to sustainability. Through the roles of consumer habits, lifestyle choices, and civic engagement played by every individual, society moves towards or away from sustainability.

As per the report published at the United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society (UNU-CS) in 2018, core principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development place individuals directly amid the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, not only as recipients of the sustainable outcomes, but also as responsible agents for the attainment of the goals as stakeholders within the sustainable development goal (SDG) programs, and as upholders of the developmental ambitions. Substantial efforts must be made to thoroughly understand and operationalize human agency, critical for achieving individual and social—including institutional—behaviors that enable self-organized development, a key attribute of sustainable development (Asah, 2015). Asah (2015), states that for any development to materialize, people must behave in a certain manner and for people to act, they must be motivated. It also follows that for any sustainable development, the motivation must originate within oneself—intrinsic to an individual and social collective to be developed. According to Middlemiss (2008), active interactions between citizens facilitate the community's understanding of sustainability and increase citizens' participation. While the commitment to sustainability is growing, an especially vital role is played by focused steps of local-level networking, recognition of active public participation, harmonized regulation of social cooperation, and ensuring institutional requisites.

As per the 2022 report from the European Commission, Directorate-General of Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, there is now widespread recognition of the interconnections between culture and creative sector, social inclusion, cohesion, and transformation of society to ensure sustainable development. Culture is widely recognized as the fourth pillar of the sustainable development agenda of 2030. As a key dimension, it recognizes the vital role of cultural values, beliefs, imagination, and social innovation in the journey towards a more sustainable way of life.

The UNESCO global report addresses culture as a global public good. According to the report (UNESCO, 2022, p. 214), more than 80% of the European and North American countries have integrated culture into their voluntary national reviews of the 2030 agenda of sustainable development.

In his book "The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning," author Jon Hawkes (2001) argues that the operation of government culture framework in conjunction with environmental and economic frameworks is critical for the achievement of a sustainable and healthy society. Cultural health is equally important for the existence of a sustainable society as the presence of societal equity, environmental obligation, and economic feasibility.

As per Dessein et al. (2015), the ability to sustain implies the ability to make connections between people and the ecosystem they reside in and utilize. In this approach, ecoculture is profoundly related to learning by utilizing place-conscious and place-responsive teachings and engaging people in discussions of what kind of environment we want to live in at present and in the future. Sustainability exists thus as a process of society-based thinking that is diverse where culture denotes both problem and possibility, form, and process, and relates to those problems, morals, and means whereby a society may continue to exist. Culture is at the root of human actions, decisions, and an overarching concern in the thought process of sustainable development and as such it is tightly intertwined with sustainability. Thus, it is a necessary overall foundation and structure for achieving the goals of sustainable development (Dessein al., 2015).

The review suggests that multiple independent studies on sustainability and sustainable development have been conducted along with a multi-dimensional focus on SDGs. The SDGs do reflect on the importance of sustainability and the efforts to bring it to the fore. Given where we stand today and the scale of effort it will take to keep all of humanity aligned to these goals, it is a challenging journey to achieve these goals and thus the implementation process to achieve SDGs should be sustainable. It calls for a framework which is inclusive, scalable, and executable in approach. Achieving inclusive and sustainable growth could be made possible by focusing on the key pillars—mindset, people, and culture (Figure 1).

Mindset

While external factors are frequently talked about and stressed when discussing development, internal factors such as mindset, which plays an important
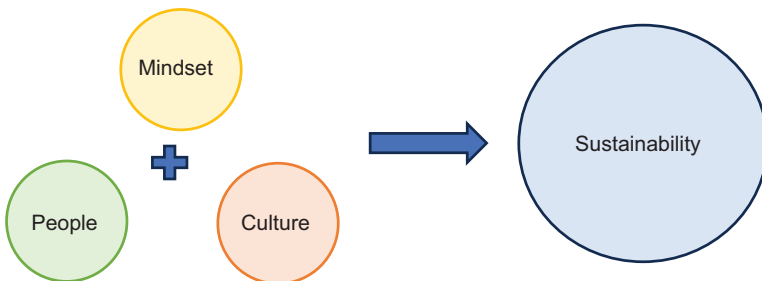

Figure 1   Key pillars of sustainable growth.

and transformative role in achieving sustainable development, is often ignored. Mindset can change our thinking, perspective, and approach. Mindset has played a key role in human progress in the past and has the potential to create a better future. Our belief systems, values, and attitudes make up our mindsets. Our mindsets then frame our thinking and our behavior. This impacts our decisions and our response to challenges. Having said that, a sustainable mindset is about being mindful of our actions and their consequences taking steps to reduce our environmental impact and striving to create a more equitable and just society for everyone. An aligned mindset will be keen and open towards innovative approaches such as promoting technological innovation, using eco-friendly materials, encouraging responsible consumption, and reducing waste. Sustainability requires a mindset which is eager to learn, collaborative in nature, and has leadership instincts.

Thus, different mindsets are identified and categorized as follows.

Learning Mindset

Through a learning mindset, one develops the attitude of being agile, action-oriented, and capable of using system thinking to capture complexities. It enables openness to use available data and try technological advancement to achieve results. It also provides impetus to develop a curious and reflective approach to developing solutions and implementing policies that lead to sustainable outcomes (Figure 2).
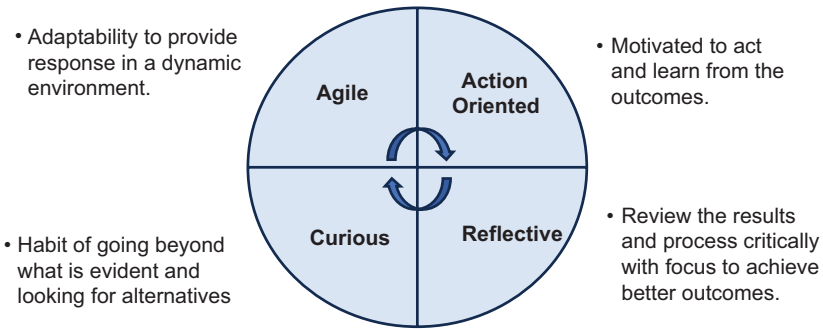

Figure 2   Learning mindset.

Collaborative Mindset

As it is very evident that sustainability requires collaborative effort and that requires a mindset to partner with stakeholders across the spectrum. A collaborative mindset drives the intent to mediate contrasting interests and reduce friction between stakeholder communities by orchestrating interactions to find common grounds and create shared ownership (Figure 3).

• Being open to other's experience and perspective.

Empathetic **Resilient**

• Determination to make progress while dealing with resistance.

• Creatively deliberate options from multiple perspective.

Facilitative **Imaginative**

• Exploring and foreseeing new possibilities for future together.

Figure 3   Collaborative mindset.

Leadership Mindset

To achieve sustainable goals there is a lot that needs to be changed and it is imperative that the right mindsets lead the change. To attain sustainable development goals, there is a dire need for leadership at every level of engagement that drives decision-making through value articulation and is focused on impactful outcomes (Figure 4).

In a nutshell, sustainability requires a mindset which is eager to learn, collaborative in nature, and has leadership instincts.
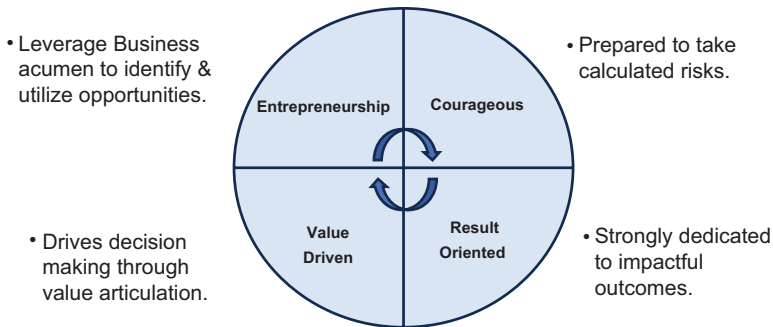
• Leverage Business acumen to identify & utilize opportunities.

Entrepreneurship **Courageous**

• Prepared to take calculated risks.

• Drives decision making through value articulation.

Value Driven **Result Oriented**

• Strongly dedicated to impactful outcomes.

Figure 4   Leadership mindset.

People

People and sustainability are inextricably linked (Vanessa Levesque, 2019). Sustainability must be achieved through, by, and for people. This involves the following two major areas of focus:

Awareness and Initiatives across Multiple Stakeholders

Educated and aware people who are consciously involved in making responsible choices for themselves as well as society are needed. Engaging people at the

grass root level for SDGs requires that the sustainable development goals be given localized and contextualized relevance to the ground realities of individuals, their communities, social groups, and local area of residence. Without any connection to the day-to-day challenges of individuals, it is exceedingly difficult to highlight the relevance of SDGs and get people's attention, commitment, and focus on these goals. This grassroots engagement can be achieved through efficient use of the knowledge base of the younger generation, their reach to the masses, and innovative solutions that are critical to the achievement of SDGs.

Youth

It is evident in the fact that the current generation of young people (between 10 years and 24 years) is about 1.8 billion and that more than 1/3rd of SDG targets refers to the young generation with a focus on participation, empowerment, and well-being. Given the right set of skills, means, and opportunities to participate, the younger generation can be the driving force to achieve sustainable growth and equity.

Youth as leaders

They do have a key role to play in enabling sustainable growth construct and holding communities, organizations, and local and national governments accountable to achieve a global transformation. When provided with awareness about their rights, role, and potential, supplemented by civic leadership skills, the young generation can be the leaders to drive change in their local communities and enable sustainable development (Edler, K. L., & Park, J., (2022).

Youth as agents of awareness

Awareness is the first step toward any development or growth. Awareness at a personal level, of the SDGs and of their relevance in today's world is an important pre-requisite to a meaningful engagement of individual people, communities, and other grassroots-level stakeholders. Only by being aware of the challenges posed by unsustainable growth trends and their impact, people can be motivated and driven to aim for sustainable development. Youth through their swift adaptability to technology and social media can be the agents for spreading awareness and sensitizing people toward sustainability at various levels in society.

Youth as a driver of change

The young generation has always been at the forefront of any and every kind of change. They always function as the flag bearers of any new trend in communities or on digital platforms. Youth activision can be the wave to highlight social, economic, and ecological issues at hand. The young generation should be actively engaged and empowered to lead the transformation using their broader connectivity and social media presence.

Youth as a creative troubleshooter

As the young generation exists in a world that is different from earlier generations and faces quite different challenges and opportunities, they always have a different and fresh perspective that enables them to identify creative ideas and solutions to problems faced by existing generations (United Nations literature document). It is a fact that every new generation of humans is more agile, smart, and innovative compared to previous generations and this insight reflects the innovative power that the young generation possesses. Given the tools, technology, and fresh perspective, the younger generation can be the innovative troubleshooters to identify solutions to achieve a sustainable development roadmap.

Culture

Culture is an all-embracing concept that refers to the way of life of individuals in a particular society (Vasilis Bouronikos, March 2022). Culture is who we are (UNESCO & Hosagrahar J., 2017), and no development can be viable in the long term without culture (Frantzeskaki, Loorbach, & Meadowcroft, 2012; UNESCO, 2009, 2013; United Nations, 2012). It is a collective set of values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices shared by groups of people. In 1995, at UNESCO, it was acknowledged that culture influences people's behavior, their contribution to the process of economic development, their social development, and their well-being (UNESCO, 2009). (Figure 5).

The elements that make any culture a powerful tool to implement an idea are the common value set held by people and the sharing among people of the same culture. It is this sharing of common beliefs and values that is an important ingredient for achieving sustainable development goals across communities, societies,
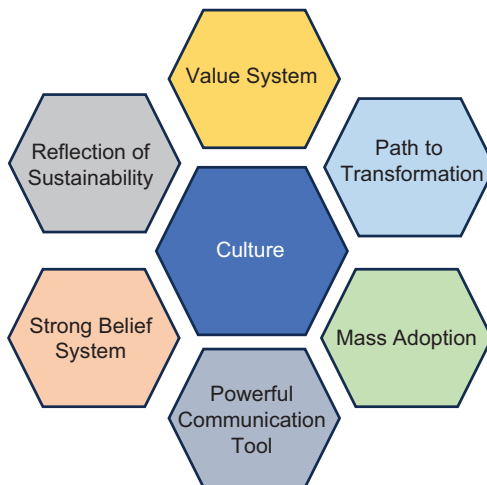

Figure 5   Culture.

and countries. Recognizing the role and importance of culture, it was defined as the fourth pillar of sustainable development by Hawkes (2001) & Sabatini F. (2019), and in 2013 the UNESCO declaration was adopted, in which culture became a key strategy for the attainment of sustainable development (Bogyay, K., UNESCO, 2013).

Culture is also a dynamic process in which information is transmitted socially among individuals and is supplemented by trust generated from the common cultural thread. When a cultural leader highlights or shares a perspective on a topic, it is widely acknowledged, accepted, and trusted by individuals and communities. Also, culture creates opportunities for intercultural dialogue which is the fundamental need for establishing collaboration across cultures, societies, and communities. This intercultural dialogue and collaboration can lead to unified recognition of our environmentally damaging actions and can also promote innovative solutions and inclusive policies. Once a common theme is established across cultures, it will be sustainable by itself, and it can be a prime driver to bring awareness at a larger scale and engage people in general and individual mindsets in particular for goals on sustainable development.

Regenerative Culture

Sustainability through culture means that sustainability should become the culture. That way we would be able to not only sustain but also restore and enhance the well-being of the inhabitants of the planet. This involves a regenerative culture which will contribute directly to the regeneration of ecosystems and social systems. Resilient systems should be developed that can adapt to changing conditions and bounce back from any disturbance. It also involves respecting and preserving diverse cultural perspectives and preserving traditional knowledge and practices. Recognizing and preserving biodiversity and restoration of degraded ecosystems is also an equally important principle of regenerative culture.

Distributive Culture

Distributive culture is a belief system where people are aware and conscious of the principle of fair and equitable distribution of resources, benefits, and opportunities among all the inhabitants. This can be achieved through collaboration and cooperation among various stakeholders like government, businesses, local communities, etc. Community empowerment in decision-making and educational initiatives also plays a vital role in developing a distributive culture.

Challenges

Awareness

The scale of effort required to increase awareness of the need to achieve SDGs is quite big. The complexity and interconnectedness of the goals add to the already

pressing problem. Spreading awareness is a collaborative and challenging effort involving governments, non-governmental organizations, businesses, educational institutions, and the media. Building partnerships, leveraging technology for communication, and integrating the SDGs into educational curricula are a few strategies to enhance awareness and promote sustainable development on a global scale.

Engagement

Sustainability is a collective effort which requires active engagement from individuals, communities, businesses, and governments. Youth engagement is at the forefront along with policy support and corporate social responsibility.

Active Participation

Endeavor of sustainability is an ongoing process which needs to be continuous and requires active participation by all and at all levels. People should be motivated enough to actively participate in sustainability.

Continuity and Commitment

The focus needs to be on a continuum to achieve output. Occasionally, a strong start is not followed by continuous improvement and additions, lacks vigor in the process, and eventually fails.

Measurement of the Progress and Reporting of Outcomes

The metrics to measure progress must be established and implemented. Evaluating the success of awareness campaigns and measuring their impact on actual behavioral change or policy implementation is a persistent challenge (Gary, R., 2010). Demonstrating tangible outcomes can help build momentum for ongoing efforts. In addition to measurement, it is equally important that the outcomes should be reported in an accessible and in form that is relatable to common citizens.

Conclusions

In 2015, all the member states of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which provides a shared vision for sustainable development for people and the planet. At the core of the agenda are the 17 SDGs that call for a global partnership between all developed and developing countries and to collaborate on a global scale to enable sustainable and inclusive growth. These sustainable development goals cannot be achieved in a silo by any country or region, rather it needs the commitment and involvement of citizens, communities, organizations, institutions, and governments. Given the

far-reaching effects of sustainable development, it needs to be engrained at every level of human existence starting from the mindset of individuals, working through partnerships of people across communities, organizations, businesses, and governments and finally getting embedded into a global culture. The young generation is rightly placed and has the power to enable the change required to recover from the damage incurred so far in the human race's journey while developing with a narrow economic-centric approach. Youth brings a learning mindset that is open to collaboration and partnership. Young people have the maximum potential to develop into future leaders who can drive the sustainability agenda forward and provide it with the right attention and priority to be part of a global culture. Only once sustainability development achieves the scale of being a cultural value, it can manifest itself to be an effective and permanent element for enabling inclusive growth that is also sustainable socially, ecologically, and economically.

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