# Young adults, the environment and sustainability: Challenges for the future

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**Abstract**

As the human population reaches seven (7) billion, environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources underscore the need for sustainable management and the protection of the planet. Realization of the dangers associated with increases in human population, worsening environmental degradation and resource shortages have served as a wake-up call that there is need for change in our approach to development. If we fail in our efforts to become sustainable, future generations are less likely to be able to achieve sustainability. It is imperative that the current ways of addressing environmental issues be changed; otherwise it will take the world longer, to become sustainable. Therefore, it is only rational that we control our unsustainable actions by making sound decisions in the interest of sustainability. This paper explores young adults' knowledge and opinions regarding a range of potential unsustainable practices and concerns relating to environmental sustainability and the future of the planet. This perception is based on the capacity of young people to herald change, given that many of them have a vision for a sustainable world and a consciousness that they will inherit this planet.

**Keywords**: consumerism, sustainability, environmental degradation, young people

## Introduction and Background

If the civilization is to survive, the next century will have to be a time of transformation - not just in technological capacity but also in our approach to the natural world, and to each other. A sustainable society would not be eroding its resource base, causing serious environmental damage or producing unacceptable social problems (Lowe, 2004, p. 165). As the human population reaches seven (7) billion, environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources underscore the need for sustainable management and the protection of the planet. Realization of the dangers associated with increases in human population, worsening environmental degradation and resource shortages have served as a wake-up call that there is need for change in our approach to development. A greater awareness of the problem ensued from the World Conference on Environment and Development (WCED) report, *Our Common Future*. This report called for economic development that allows present generations to meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to cater to theirs (WCED, 1987). The report also raised awareness to the substantial nature of the problems the global environment faces, as well as the untold hardships people have experienced with growing intensity throughout the world, especially in the global South.

As Freis-Tordini (2003, 2005) explains, stress to the environment includes such things as the decrease in varieties of animal and plant species, increase in floods and fires and increase in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere effecting climates and the ozone layer. According to Freis-Tordini, (2003, 2005) care and protection of the environment is necessary. Without such care and protection it will be difficult to abate the continued depletion of world's lands and waterways, as well as the reduction of global carbon dioxide pollution. The human race currently faces grave environmental problems and challenges. Therefore approaching sustainability is urgent, not only for future generations, but because the present generations' existence depend on it (Goodland, 1994, p. 78).

If we fail in our efforts to become sustainable, future generations are less likely to be able to achieve sustainability. It is imperative that the current ways of addressing environmental issues be changed; otherwise it will take the world longer, to become sustainable. Therefore, it is only rational that we control our unsustainable actions by making sound decisions in the interest of sustainability. Moody (2000) suggests that young people have a role to play in addressing environmental and sustainability issues; with their knowledge of these issues and their passion, enthusiasm and "constructive naivety," young adults can offer a fresh perspective on the implementation of sustainable change. This paper explores young adults' knowledge and opinions regarding a range of potential unsustainable practices and concerns relating to environmental sustainability and the future of the planet. This perception is based on the capacity of young people to herald change, given that many of them have a vision for a sustainable world and a consciousness that they will inherit this planet.

## Research Methodology

This study provides an understanding into the nature and scope of young-adults' activities in relation to sustainability and environmental protection and their engagement in them. The central question that shaped this research is: *How do young adults' learning and experiences influence their decision to live sustainably?* More specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are young peoples' views about environmental issues like climate change?
- What are the sources for learning about environment and sustainability issues?

- How do their learning encounters and engagements in turn affect the young adults' actions toward environmental protection and decision making?

This research pursues a transformative response to sustainability. To answer the key research questions, data were obtained using a qualitative phenomenographic research approach and collected through 18 face-to-face interviews with research participants.

This present study examines the lived experience of young-adults from a phenomenological point of view with regards to environment and sustainability issues. In this study, I focused on the narratives of the research participants, this work has avoided appropriating their voices, misrepresenting them or imposing theories on what they said and did. As noted by Dei, Butler, Charania, Kola-Olusanya, Thomas-Long, Opini and Wagner (2010), qualitative research methodology relies on the words of participants to reveal the subjective tensions, struggles, contradictions and ambiguities regarding the issues at hand.

The importance of "voice" in qualitative research cannot be overemphasized. Voices convey personal feelings, thoughts, desires and politics. Voices allow readers to bring their own interpretations to the data (Dei, 2010). By showcasing the actual voices of participants, the discussion moves beyond an abstract and theoretical observation of phenomena. This study is based on individual interviews with each of the 18 young adults who were enrolled in three Canadian universities at the time of this study. In the interviews, I explored the research participants' understanding of key environmental issues, such as climate change and global warming, sustainable development, the context of their experiences in relation to environmental issues and their view of the "trade-offs" for the environment. However, the focus in this study is not an examination of their level of awareness or behaviour. Its aim is to enhance the descriptive rather that evaluative elements of the lived experiences.

As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state, professional etiquette informing research with human subjects asserts that no one deserves to be harmed or embarrassed as a result of research practices. Hence the protection of participants' anonymity is viewed as a central and guiding principle in ethical research practice to safeguard against unwanted exposure and the disclosure of private knowledge. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the research participants' identities and ensure their anonymity, as well as all recognizable information mentioned in the interviews.

The interview questions were designed to elicit information based on Patton's (2002) five primary question categories:

1. experience/behaviour (what a person does or has done);
2. opinion/value questions (aimed at understanding the subject's cognitive and interpretive processes);
3. feelings (emotional responses to experiences and thoughts);
4. knowledge (factual information); and
5. Sensory experience (what is seen, heard, touched, tasted and/or smelled).

The range of the questions covered sources of knowledge, learning influences, experiences, and activities related to environmental sustainability and consumerism or consumer culture. This research follows a qualitative research design to address the research questions. Through semi-structured interviews I engaged the participants in conversation to understand how their actions and thoughts have been shaped by the knowledge of environmental sustainability issues.

As Clarke (2002) observes, "one of the key problems with qualitative research is organizing the data in such a way that they facilitate systemic analysis" (p.178). Recognizing this problem, I followed Glesne's (1999) analysis process, which involves organizing what you have seen, heard and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with the data,

I describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories and link your story to other stories. To do so, categorized and organized these nodes into a hierarchical system and finally into a common structure, or an overarching framework "by which to understand and later speak about the data as a whole" (Kahn, 1999, p.86). According to Ely, Anzul et al (1991) making categories means reading, thinking, trying out tentative categories, changing them when others do a better job, checking them until the very last piece of meaningful information is categorized and, even at the point, being open to revising the categories (Tsouluhas, 2005).

## Results and Discussion
## Consumerism and a Sustainable Future

In the following discussion, I explore the views the young adults espouse regarding the consequences of consumerism and its impact on achieving an environmentally and sustainable future. The young adults in this research study appear to be acutely aware of the environmental impact of consumerism and consumption. When considering the environmental impacts of consumption, the research participants tend to focus on the disposal and recycling of waste and the insatiable consumption of today's young people.

The young adults in this study have strong feelings regarding consumerist culture, which views everything as disposable in its attempt to create space for new acquisitions irrespective of their utility value. The young adults view continuous exposure to advertisements targeting their generation through televisions, radio and even the Internet, as well as in educational settings, such as schools, as responsible for the present expansion and seemingly uncontrollable culture of consumerism among young people. Despite their exposure to advertising, the young adults in this study exhibit a deep understanding of the implications of consumption and consumerism. They also agree that it has not been easy for them growing up in a world where their generation has been branded and measured by their consumption of goods and services.

When asked, *"Do you see this culture of consumerism as a barrier towards taking action to sustainability?"* The young adults in this research study were unanimous in their response. Mia, for example, makes the following connection between the culture of buying and the choices available to young adults:

> I see it as a barrier, because when youth get used to shopping a lot when they're younger, and there's all these different things that they can buy and choices, they'll find it harder later on in life to move away from that; and even if they realize [that it is an] environmental issue and want to change, it's [going to be] quite hard to make that move from buying a lot to buying less, and I consider it a barrier, because if they were influenced in that way they'll just continue to be.
> [File YA02: Text Units 843 - 863]

Ava refers to the culture of desire and consumption among young adults as a large problem, particularly as it continues to put pressure on natural resources.

> Well it's just the sheer amount of resources that you have to use; especially what people want... around this age...in general ...want things, and things are made up of other things, and other things you have to extract from wherever; and a lot of those things aren't made in such a way that they can be reused once they are finished. So you have all this left over stuff that isn't useful for anything, and isn't recyclable or reusable in any way and that's a problem; it is definitely...a troubling situation, since I'm still definitely a part of consumerism; so it's

> difficult to attack that because I think [young people]...especially myself, ...I know I want [to have] everything. [File YA03: Text Units 694 - 874]

Ava points out that consumption must be viewed as closely related to resource extraction and waste. According to Ava, lack of control over consumerism is exacerbated by the blurring of differences between necessities and luxury goods. However, while she is conscious of the relationship between consumption and the environment, Ava admittedly has a "taste for everything," making undertaking active efforts aimed at improving the state of the environment a difficult task for her.

To a large degree, "having everything" is one of the chief ways through which young adults today establish their personal identities and present themselves to others, thereby making it difficult for them to change the habits that are essential in defining who they are (Fien & Skoien, 2001; Nyberg & Sto, 2001). Cadence and Maddox point out that consumption promotes self-identity and that social and peer pressure tends to be the strongest driving forces among young adults' consumption habits.

> Cadence : Yes the consumerist culture that is being ingrained into the younger generation [is a barrier] because it's based on an assumption that you are successful [in] life if you have Mercedes, if you have a walk-in closet filled with Gucci...that they will only be successful based on how many thing they have and how much perfume they have. [This] will probably directly lead to the demise of the planet. [File YA12: Text Units 533 - 564]

> Maddox: Definitely.... for instance young adults, especially from my background and culture, they want materialistic things and they want the big cars and the big SUV's. It might not be sustainable for the environment but it has some status behind it, and that was status versus environment and...They're getting more pressure from the status on the consuming side than the environmental side; so I think that the status will win and I think that's a big a challenge that a lot of youth will face, because there's so much things that make you consume and grab your attention and.... overpower the sustainability of the environment side of things. [File YA14: Text Units 516 - 555]

Cadence and Maddox point out that because society is materialistically oriented; today's young adults have bought into the idea that to be successful in life, you need to have more. This materialism promotes the perception that self-identity is anchored in consumerism; "I am what I have" is the operative definition of self, or to paraphrase Descartes, "I shop, therefore I am" (Dittmar, 1992, p. 3). In this sense, self-identity is tied strongly with possessions; consumer goods are symbols of status, political or religious views, social group and sexuality (Kaza, 2000).

Other young adult participants point to young adults' vulnerability to advertising and the false consciousness of consumer culture that owning products will make them happier. Brooklyn explains,

> I think it is a barrier because people lose sight of what's important; and if you are targeted as a youth by a campaign that says that best thing you can do for yourself, the thing that will make you happy, is to drive an Equinox, a big SUV, a Hummer you're going to think so, and your goal will be to attain that Hummer; whereas when you get that Hummer it's not going to make you happy; you're not going to get a girlfriend. I think the advertising that we're bombarded with is extremely false and it gives a false sense of happiness or what will make us

happy; but the thing is we're so susceptible to it; we fall for it; I fall for it all the time. I work out every day because I think it will make me slimmer. It has, it's made me healthy, but it's because the media. I'm bombarded with an image of what women should look like. [File YA05: Text Units 683 - 727]

Although Brooklyn agrees that everyone is susceptible to the false advertisements, she links the high level of consumerism among young adults to the daily bombardment of "false" advertisement messages, targeting young people and suggesting that happiness will be attained through owning the advertised product. Zoe similarly criticizes the materialistic orientation, in the sense that having more brings happiness:

I think it's a big problem because, especially conspicuous consumerism where we're just buying things because our neighbour has it....  We should really look at the practicality of the things we buy. If you need running shoes, you need running shoes so you can walk comfortably, but you don't need $850 Nike's.... If you [feel that] having an Xbox that makes you better.... we know for a fact there's not that much practicality to it. So I think consumerism is a huge problem. That's why we're like, "Oh, it's okay" that some little kid in Indonesia has to work for twelve hours to make my shoes or we're destroying the rainforest to plant certain things just so I can have what I want [File YA07: Text Units 615 - 671].

Dakota discusses social pressure as the drive to maintaining high consumption standards and considers this as a serious environmental challenge, stemming not only from affluence and the conspicuous display of wealth, but also from the increasing absence of other alternatives:

We are in the Western world, and a lot of the way you live is tied to consumerism...but people do it all the same.... For example, you have three cars or you need to have the latest iPod or the latest Mac [computer]...these are what contribute to those high levels of consumption, and ultimately social pressure.... I think cost and culture, because people do things which are not sustainable, which are not cheap either, they're really expensive but you do it all the same cause it's part of this image, it's part of the culture, it's what you know, it's what you do. Environmentally friendly consumption is ridiculously expensive, because it's almost like you have this weird class... [only rich] people can afford the cost of organic foods or shop in eco-friendly stores, because...it's way more expensive... to shop at all these places than at Wal-Mart, which by the way is not as sustainable. [File YA09: Text Units 516 - 549]

Dakota speaks to the quandary people find themselves in, especially when it comes to buying "green." She views the lack of affordable environmentally friendly consumption options and costly organic products as responsible for unsustainable buying and consumption. Other young adults, such as Taegan, Maddox and Cadence discussed the environmental threat associated with global consumerist culture. These young adults feel that if nothing is done, the current consumption trend will continue to undermine the planet's resources' base. They believe that this trend is unfair to future generations as well as present ones. Taegan explains,

In terms of consumerism, it doesn't really serve any real purpose other than to feed multinational corporations and businesses. It's all about selling things.... I think consumerism is a big problem, but I think it's all so tied with our identity that we don't even sometimes realizes we're being.... So it's a big problem, because you can't sustain it; you can't keep everyone buying all the time.... We did a thing in my geography class and they said you need two or three other

planets if everyone was to consume at a North American level, which if you think about it, it's ridiculous, because we don't have two or three other planets. So consumerism at the levels that it is now is ridiculous [and] it doesn't work with sustainable development at all. I think it's completely driving us away from it. [File YA10: Text Units 856 - 891]

Taegan describes consumerism as a complex issue that has wide-reaching social and environmental implications. He argues that consumerism not only benefits the interests of the corporations, it is also drives environmental destruction at a rate that is as fast, if not faster than population growth. Taegan's analysis of the impact of consumerism on sustainability speaks to Kortens' (1995) view of corporations as for-profit superstructures, whose interests are all about encouraging consumerism with least concern for the resultant environmental degradation and global unsustainability.

Demonstrating the unsustainability of current levels of consumption the young adults in this study addressed the issue of over-consumption, which has gone far beyond basic needs to a level of consumption that embraces superficial material comforts instead of real human relationships (Martin, Hanson, Ayotte, & Neary, 2005). The young adults in this study agree that consumerism runs counter to environmental sustainability, and warn that uncontrolled and obsessive consumerism among young adults could lead to a global environmental catastrophe. However, while there is a general agreement that the current level of consumption among young adults is unsustainable and consumerism could constitute a barrier to attaining environmental sustainability, a few of the research participants feel that this situation can be reversed.

The young adults suggest that the promotion of unsustainable consumption should be replaced with the promotion of a more conscious ethical approach towards sustainable consumption in order to curb consumerism among young adults. This approach involves education about the consequences of unsustainable and unnecessary consumption and is considered by Berry and McEachern (2005) to be a vital approach that could stimulate young adults to change their patterns of consumption behaviour positively.

Describing how to curb consumerism among young adults, Brooklyn suggests using advertisements and campaigns to alter young adults' product awareness: "We all fall for it [the ads] and I think we can trick people into caring about the environment too. We can make it cool." "Making it cool" suggests packaging environmental advertisements and messages in such way that they will communicate and speak to young adults in the same way that regular advertisement do. The expectation here is that such advertisements will not only educate young people to resist the temptation of unnecessary consumption, they will also expose them to the negative sides of consumerism from the economical and environmental perspectives.

The young adults in this study recognize that consumerism or consumption cannot be outrightly cancelled and that the pillars of the Western and North American economy because consumerism has become the "means by which the new capitalism maintains control of its buying public" (Cronk, 1996, n. p.). The young adults suggest that a change towards marketing ethical products can help us move towards sustainability,

> Brooklyn: We need to change what we're marketing. The culture of consumerism you can't; I think it will always be there just because that's how this Western world works, but instead of promoting SUV's, [we should] promote the hybrid vehicle... [by] making it look cool to live sustainably. [YA05: 683 - 727]

This example of adjusting to the reality of consumerism follows the current trend, whereby more and more product advertisements that appear in the various media are touting the environmentally-

friendly nature of the products as one of the reasons the product should be purchased. But not necessarily because such products may promote or contribute to an environmentally sound society or lead to some sort of transformation that will lead the people away from unsustainable ways of life. The danger inherent in Brooklyn's suggestion above is that it encourages business as usual which fit with sustainable development discourse. Further, accepting the way things are by leading a pseudo-sustainable life also can situated within the powerlessness of the consuming public and hegemonic idea which suggest that this is only way people can organize themselves socially.

Thus, for young adults who are strongly in favour of sustainability and green, that is, environmentally friendly consumption, this pattern of advertising green or environmental friendly products is viewed as supportive of efforts towards attaining sustainability. In addition to encouraging green shopping such advertisements hold the power to help consumers become aware as well as develop a green consumer culture that recognizes the finitude of earth's natural resources (Martin et al., 2005). Since as Berry and McEachern (2005) claim, becoming aware of product information does affect how a potential consumer responds to the products. However, while not discounting the views of Berry and McEachern (2005) and Martin et al. (2005) regarding advantages of eco-labelling, making such marketing adjustments to promote environmental friendly consumption has tended to only to promote `greenwashing` *(a term suggesting merging the concepts of "green" (environmentally sound) and "whitewashing" - to conceal or gloss over wrongdoing)* and not sustainability (Case, 2007).

As noted by Terrachoice (2007) greenwashing is been made possible due to the growing demand for more environmentally preferable goods and services has led many manufacturers to find cost effective ways of improving their environmental performance and the environmental performance of their offerings. According to Terrachoice (2007) and Case (2007) such act will not only mislead consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service, it perpetuates business as usual type of sustainability. As Fleming (1992) points out, the Ecolabel scheme focuses on a minor problem as a relief from having to tackle major ones. Hale (1996) on the other hand argued that tackling the real environmental issues associated with product manufacture, use and disposal requires radical steps, beyond eco-labelling, but as Flemming (1992) concludes only transformative learning/ education and training is therefore essential to this process and the promotion of eco-consumption.

**Economic Growth, Environment and Sustainability**

Despite significant progress towards sustainable development, increased extraction of natural resources, accumulation of waste and concentration of carbon dioxide emissions have continued to place considerable stress on the global environment (Panayotou, 1995). Research evidence in the field of environmental economics and development point to the growth in global economic activities as being responsible for current levels of environmental degradation and a decline in human welfare (See for instance, Beckerman, 1992; Panayotou, 1995). McInnes (2002) and Panayotou (1995) caution that if economic growth continues to be based on traditional, environmentally damaging activities, the world will not be able to sustain economic growth indefinitely, without running into resource constraints or despoiling the environment beyond repair.

Inspired by McInnes (2002) and Panayotou's (1995) warning, I asked the young adults in this research whether they think maintaining economic growth is more important than protecting the natural environment. In response to this question, all of the young adults stated that it is unfair to continue to degrade and destroy environmental quality in the manner we are currently. The

young adults criticized present economic growth and development, which they described as anthropocentric[1] and detrimental to the survival of the planet, and made a strong argument for balance between economic growth, development and environmental protection, i.e., sustainable development.

As I probed further into their perspectives on this topic, the young adults provided different responses, for example Taegan refers to the unsustainable economic activity on the Canadian Newfoundland Coast, where overexploitation and over-fishing have been identified as responsible for causing a drastic reduction in the local cod fish population.

> I've read books on this and the only reason you have economic growth is because of environmental systems, so to completely disengage the two and disconnect them is completely wrong…. Look at fishing, its importance to Newfoundland's economy, and yet it collapsed...All they were focused on was growth, growth, growth; catch more cod, catch more cod, increase the quotas. They had "scientists" collecting data and stuff like that but [all the warnings were disregarded]. The economy is a natural offshoot of the environment, because all of the goods that we sell come from the environment, whether it be an oil field and things like that. So to say that the economy is more important than the environment is completely wrong. [File YA10: Text units 783 - 832]

Taegan cites the example of how Canada's abundant cod stocks off the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador were fished to the brink of extinction in what is considered to be one of the biggest ecological disasters of the century. The cod fishery collapse resulted in the area's economic collapse and what is referred to as the greatest job layoff in Canadian history (Greenpeace, n. d.). The codfish example vividly illustrates how unsustainable economic and technological practices that view natural resources as infinite could systematically lead to the total destruction and devastation of the environment and annihilation of its natural resources. This kind of destruction and devastation could be linked to the 'crisis of modernity' (Boggs, 1993; Rogers, 1994).

The Canadian calamity also demonstrates that we now have the technological capability to find and annihilate every commercial fish stock, in any ocean and sea, and do irreparable damage to entire ecosystems in the process (Greenpeace, n. d.). While the long term effect of unsustainable economic activities and irresponsible business practices may be easily quantified in terms of their economic impact (that is, job loss and economic stagnation, among others), the same cannot be said of the long-term environmental impact and marine devastation or the social cost (that is, their effect on fishing communities and families). This perspective was shared by some of the young adults.

Maddox refers to the corporate business perception of the environment. Maddox argues that the drive and concern for profit are the chief reason why the environment is considered less important than economic growth and that economic activity has continued with little or no consideration for the state of the environment.

> [When] it comes to the day-to-day operations in life...economy comes first. For example, companies and shareholders will not take a loss of their profit to help the environment, because economics come first; and I think it should be the other way around theoretically... because they can't quantify the impact to the environment; and business comes down to quantifying things and they can quantify the profit or loss in dollars and pounds…. [So] until the government puts

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[1] A term from environmental political philosophy denoting a human-centred ethical system

> the regulation to say that it's going to cost you X dollars for damages to the environment and if they do not follow the guidelines, they will be penalized…it's just something that's unreachable, unattainable. [File YA14: Text Units 494 - 515]

Maddox captures the anthropocentric economic policy of Western capitalist countries and its preference for economic and development considerations that commodifies everything, including the environment and its resources. Ironically, regardless of its impact on the environment, the "success" of the Western model of unsustainable economic development has made these countries models for the new emerging economies, such as China, India and other developing countries (Barbosa, 2005). It is tragic that the same unsustainable economic model that has devastated the environment is being equated with modernization, development and progress (Barbosa, 2005).

In addition, the inability to quantify environmental resources that Maddox refers to is rooted in the principles of capitalism. According to Marx (1906) in the capitalist model nature or natural resources do not have value on their own; they acquire value when they become a commodity. For example, as a natural resource, fossil fuel has no value of its own, but becomes valued in the market where it is sold as a precious commodity (Fox, 2005). This is an age-old excuse employed by governments, economists, corporations, businesses and industries to defend the continued pollution and devastation of the environment, even as growing concerns point toward a steady decline of environmental quality.

The young adults in this study are of the opinion that governments have a major role to play in enforcing regulations and / or international conventions; however many of the G8 nations have not implemented promised support for and enforcement of tougher environmental regulations and protocols that could possibly ensure sustainable economic development. For instance the governments of Canada and the US have refused to put a price on carbon emissions, either through a carbon tax or a meaningful cap and trade system, thereby providing polluting industries with a wide field in which they continue to emit carbon constituents into the atmosphere.

In a similar vein, Scarlet underscores the disproportionate economic power that Western countries exercise in external ownership, and the accelerated exploitation of natural resources. Scarlet speaks to the need for developed countries to control economic growth for the sake of the environment.

> I think the countries that are developed shouldn't think about economic growth. They only need to sustain and consolidate their growth without compromising the environment; they are already developed and the reason they got there probably was because…they did a whole lot of things that have contributed negatively to the environment.… They should halt or slow down economic growth and development. [File YA04: Text Units 501 - 532]

Scarlet echoes the stance of developing countries at the 1992 *United Nation Earth Conference*, where based on past lessons of unsustainable development, they rejected advice from developed countries to embrace the Western economic development model. Scarlet regards the past economic activities of developed countries as responsible for the present-day global degradation of the environment. This is especially noteworthy, considering that the global ecosystem has reached a point where regenerative and assimilative capacity is dangerously strained. Therefore, asking developed countries to "halt or slow down" for the sake of environmental sustainability, in Scarlet's view, will bode well for the environment as well as promote intergenerational equity.

Recent recognition of the dangers associated with any growth beyond the carrying capacity of the supporting ecosystems suggests that humans must seek to sustain global life support systems indefinitely (Goodland, 1997) for the needs of the future generation to be met. As Goodland (1994), explains "embracing environmental sustainability consciousness among nations will not only protect against the liquidation of natural capital, it will also help in the preservation of the totality of the environment from the vagaries of unsustainable economic growth and development" (p. 78). Without this realization, preserving natural capital, supporting ecosystems and the environment for future generations might just be impossible.

**Environmental Sustainability: Sustainable Practices and Decision Making**

The ideas that we can make sound environmental decisions are based on a readiness to "trade off" certain activities and needs that are considered unsustainable. In this section, I discuss the responses of the young adults in this research study to two hypothetical scenarios, involving decision making towards environmental sustainability.

In presenting the first scenario, I asked the young adults to assume the hypothetical role of a farmer.

> *I want you to see yourself as a farmer and you would agree that presently in the world there is a huge problem around feeding the world. Everyday half of the world's population goes to sleep hungry, wakes up hungry while the other half wakes up in the midst of plenty and waste.*

Based on the first hypothetical scenario, I asked the research participants whether as farmers they would apply inorganic fertilizer to the soil to increase agricultural yield and whether they think adding fertilizer to soil to increase output is a sustainable process. The young adults, for the most part, responded negatively to the idea of using inorganic fertilizer. In response to this question Mia states:

> I would not use chemical fertilizers.... I don't think it's sustainable. [Although] you get more food, but it's also less nutritious and it also wears out the soil; so in the long run you're not really helping the world…. The chemical effects are bad for our health and cause a lot of problems; and I don't think it's worth it to feed people and then have them develop cancer from the food that they eat.... Fertilizers also pollute the ground water, so there's less fresh water for the world because all the fertilizer seeps down…they end up in the environment... polluting the waters and the soil; and we should learn how to work with the soil without fertilizers. I see that as more sustainable, because even in the long run I'm sure there will be a time, or there's a time in the past we didn't have fertilizers for such a long time and we were able to grow food. So I don't see why we have to use fertilizers now. [File YA02: Text Units 431 - 481]

Mia in her comments points to the negative impacts for humans, the soil, rivers and streams that are associated with the use of chemical fertilizers to increase or boost agricultural yield or to simplify the production process. Mia speaks to the disastrous consequences that may occur from the widespread use of chemical fertilizers. While moderate use of chemical fertilizers is purported not to be dangerous, there is ample evidence suggesting that repeated application over a longer time frame has resulted in environmental degradation (Greenpeace, 2008).

Other young adults agree with Mia that chemical fertilizer use contributes to the loss of the soil's natural nutrients and in the process destroys the capability of the soil to function. They also point to the impact of increasing the chemical run-off from fertilizer use on farmlands and how it is

polluting waterways and killing beneficial aquatic life; these consequences end up negatively affecting the food supply. Cadence believes that a return to farming as it was done in the past is the best approach to sustainable food yield, without degrading the environment. She refers to the use of chemical fertilizer to increase agricultural yield as a band-aid solution that would only contribute to food waste.

> It's a band-aid solution.… It's just going to exacerbate the waste that we see in North America. So the problem isn't quantity. I believe the quantity is there; it's already there; it's already in excess. What we need globally is an improvement in [the food] distribution system. [File YA12: Text Units 287 - 340]

Within the North American context, as Cadence argues, the amount of food available can adequately feed the rest of the world, if the total food waste is taken in account. Cadence implicates the food distribution system as being responsible for the food shortage situation and not the lack of food.

Food waste is common to North America and other Western (developed) countries. Food waste starts from the farm and continues through the chains of distribution points, through to the consumption points, such as individual school cafeterias, grocery stores, homes and restaurants. Official surveys indicate that every year more than 350 billion pounds (160 billion kg) of edible food is available for human consumption in the US (Rizvi, (2004). Of that total, Rizvi (2004) claims, nearly 100 billion pounds (45 billion kg), including fresh vegetables, fruit, milk and grain products are lost to waste by retailers, restaurants and consumers. Rizvi further adds that by contrast, the amount of food required to meet the needs of the hungry world-wide is only four billion pounds; yet more than 30 million people in the United States go hungry on regular basis.

A few of the young adults in this study responded indifferently to the farmer's scenario. They argue that there is little or no option to boost food yield to cater to the needs of half of the world's population that lack food. Liam contends that,

> Whether or not it's sustainable, it's not really [the problem] at this point. There are not really many more options, because if they don't use pesticides, their yield won't be as large and they won't be able to sustain their farms over time, so there has to be some sort of...government...tax breaks or incentives for becoming an organic farmer or, if organic farming is not the answer, to do some other type of farming where you can be sustainable; and I guess the hardest thing is in developing countries where the governments don't necessarily have the money to offer those incentives.... It's really hard to change the status quo; they are used to using pesticides. [File YA17: Text Units 451 - 510]

Liam raises the dilemma that farmers around the world face with respect to the use of chemical fertilizers on their farms and concerns revolving around meeting their annual yield target. Considerations for the environment or sustainable agricultural practices appear secondary, because the driving force is often an individual farmer's survival and sustenance. Without the government's intervention, as Liam contends, in the form of subvention and grants, many farmers might find it very hard to change the status quo. This situation places a question mark on the global quest for sustainable agricultural practice.

> In presenting the second scenario, I asked the young adults in this study to assume the hypothetical role of a politician. *Imagine yourself as a politician from a city/province or state with urban smog and an air pollution problem. You're told to support a bill that will give income tax rebates to people who purchase environmentally friendly automobiles, like*

> *the hybrid vehicles, even though your constituency prefers the cheaper gas guzzling*
> *vehicles, like the SUV, which is cheaper than the hybrid. What would you do and why?*

Maddox responded that he would go with the wishes of his constituency rather than support the bill because "from a politician's perspective my objective is to do what the majority of my constituency want.... If the people prefer SUVs and have little interest in economic incentives, I will vote against the bill that supports hybrid cars." Maddox explains his approach,

> I think that the government should be putting incentives to make sure that the hybrid cars become cheaper instead of making people buy the more expensive option. So I think it comes down to the design phase of things to solve that. [File YA14: Text Units 604 - 645]

Maddox's views are reminiscent of the trademark safe-politicking tactics that politicians today employ in order to stay in office. Maddox suggests that the government is not doing, or has not done, enough to encourage people to embrace environmentally friendly automobiles. Without doubt, Maddox's response points to a gap in some young adults' ability to make informed decisions for the good of the environment and humanity.

On the other hand, the responses of some of the young adults, such as Brooklyn and Mia portray them as bound by a sense of duty and responsibility to the people. For example, Brooklyn states,

> I would support a bill promoting the use of environmentally friendly vehicles. I would do everything in my power to ensure that bill went through.... I think it's very important to use my position to educate my constituency; so I'd hold meetings; I'd send out e-mails; I'd try to inform people about what I'm voting on...when I make decisions with the long term in mind; and I will continue to work towards what is good in the long run for the public, like protecting the environment, for example. [File YA05: Text Units 772 - 789]

Similarly, Mia explains,

> I would vote for the bill because I see it as more sustainable and I would have a lot of fights with my constituency, probably, but I would try and get hard facts and data about environmental sustainability and try and remind them of the Kyoto Protocol and those type of things, like commitments that Canada and the world are trying to make and trying to get some change; and I would definitely vote for the bill, the hybrid and tax credits. [File YA02: Text Units 912 - 935]

Both Brooklyn and Mia demonstrate awareness that it wouldn't be an easy task to convince their constituency to follow their decision. Yet, both would go ahead to vote in support of the bill, because they believe in the importance of their decision and its impact on the environment and future generations. To obtain the support of their constituency for their vote, they would provide them (the constituency) with information to educate them on the benefits of the bill.

While one cannot conclusively determine whether these young adults will stand by their convictions in a few years time, the question of their judgement in decision making to guide their communities towards making informed environmental decision, speaks to their sense commitment to a sustainable world and future which may not easily dismissed. These responses rekindled my hope that a sustainable future is after all attainable, given the genuine concern and the ability of many of today's young adults to rise to the challenges of global warming and climate change, disease, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation and ozone layer depletion, to name a few.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I explored potential unsustainable practices and concerns relating to environmental sustainability and the future of the planet. As the above discussions suggest, the young adults are generally well informed about issues that are considered important and related to a sustainable future. As such it can be assumed that when they are confronted with different scenarios and asked questions, such as these, the young adults will be able to apply good judgment in their daily dealings, while ultimately working towards environmental just and sustainable future.

By demonstrating a good grasp of the issues pertinent to a sustainable future, the young adults were able to show that in addition to being knowledgeable about the problems, they are also capable of addressing what are considered to be the environmental sustainability challenges of the future. This suggests that an environmentally sustainable future may afterall be attainable. Environmental and sustainability issues, such as global climate change, increasing demands on the world's natural resources, social instability and increasing poverty mean that it is absolutely vital for our young people to fully understand and feel empowered to live more contentedly and harmoniously within the earth's capacity. Informed choices and decision-making are at the heart of learning for sustainability. If young people can understand how their individual choices have both local and global consequences, then they will be better equipped to make environmentally balanced decisions

**Note on Contributor**

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