

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission Template

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Summary:

Has 'sustainable development' gotten lost? With selfish distribution in both sectors, and energy demand to double, underdeveloped societies require ethical guidance. Nations should decrease dependency on imports, and make responsible energy choices. Failure to link solutions to quality of life and living standards can be addressed, firstly via achieving global consensus, commitment, investment and ensuring youths become innovative. Secondly, protecting the vulnerable, removing vested interests and demanding answers will nurture social justice and equity. Health promotion principles should inform any strategy. We face a crisis of culture. Ongoing debate and action allows a humanitarian and sustainable way forward for society.

Essay:

Has society reached a plateau as regards resources and space? 'Sustainable development' is more often used as a buzzword than for any real purpose. It can be simply defined as "the capacity to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN 2007). This crisis reflects a multitude of problems, from climate change to the ongoing global downturn, from the western way of doing business to our ignorance of the plight of ordinary citizens worldwide.

Critics have argued that it is not so much the means of production that is resulting in food shortages, but rather selfish distribution that has its roots in politics (Raney and Pingali 2007). Genetically modified crops are often heralded as the solution. However, even if ongoing safety fears were allayed, they remain unfeasible as long as companies such as Monsanto have a monopoly, possessing 60 -100% of patents on some crop seeds. Biofuel crops have also generated controversy and it is unclear whether the inevitable trade-off with food crops will damage already disadvantaged societies further. The ongoing gas dispute between Russia and the Ukraine is one of many examples demonstrating this same selfishness in the energy sector.

With the International Energy Agency predicting energy demand to double by 2050, inaction will mean furthering climate change. Less developed countries require guidance to avoid our mistakes, and yet they must not be limited in prospering, a strategy termed "climate equity" (Greenpeace 2009). Each nation should seek to decrease dependency on imports. Many Irish citizens will attest to our temperate climate, therefore limiting solar energy production here. Wind energy however has fantastic potential, but its Achilles' heel lies in its variability and storage difficulties. This may be overcome through greater interconnection of wind farms between countries, research into improved storage systems as well as wind power forecasting. The latter would garner energy security and the potential to export a home-grown product (Lang 2007). Similar benefits would apply to wielding wave energy.

Energy efficient homes should be the norm, and the responsibility lies firstly with government to ensure economic attractiveness and technological feasibility for both the construction industry and consumer. Personal responsibility is also vital. The onus is on

us to vote with our feet. Environmentally friendly products and the term 'better value for money' must be made synonymous - a principle the automobile industry should keep in mind in particular. The switch by select nations to compact fluorescent light bulbs is a potent example of the radical shift that is needed (Greenpeace 2009).

We can eternally discuss both the accepted and contested solutions. I would argue however that the link to quality of life and living standards is rarely made. My academic background relates to health promotion, defined in the Ottawa Charter (1986) as "the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health." You cannot take a one dimensional approach to health as it is composed of multiple determinants (Dahlgren and Whitehead 1991). The same can be said of society.

Two barriers must be overcome before we can correct this gross oversight. Firstly, we must achieve a consensus on this threat and a commitment to change that begins immediately, rather than a distant target set at a string of seemingly never ending conferences. Averting this disastrous course also means overhauling many existing technologies. This can only be realised through governmental and private investment, and by ensuring that solving the crisis innovatively is both exciting and attractive, most of all to youths worldwide. It is this demographic who will feel the brunt of our shortcomings.

Secondly, every nation has a responsibility to protect the vulnerable. Thousands perish daily in savage struggles that revolve not just around food and energy, but religion, race and clashes of culture amongst others. Conflicts in Ogaden, Chad, Darfur, the Gaza Strip and Kashmir reflect political instability, a dire threat in its own right. If vested interests over natural resources were removed, diplomacy would regularly win out. How can we make global citizens, many who are desperately poor and neglected, care about sustainable development when we consistently fail to care passionately about them, and risk more than genocide in the process?

We must demand answers: Who is profiteering whilst ignoring corporate responsibility and how might we punish the offenders? How do we promote a global culture of social justice and equity, as enshrined in the Jakarta Declaration (1997) on leading health into the 21st century? How do we prioritise vulnerable groups in the face of this food and energy crisis?

The principles of health promotion (Rootman et al 1998) should be incorporated into any strategy: Empowerment through sharing power, knowledge and skills which will increase equitable resource access; participation through ensuring those affected are invited to contribute to planning and analysis of this issue; a holistic approach by recognising that the crisis affects real individuals and degrades their humanity; an intersectoral and multidisciplinary approach by ensuring governments, the private sector and lay citizens, in different settings, are involved; sustainability by examining whether current solutions have a life beyond initial investment or the annual one-week focus.

From region to region, the battleground changes, meaning isolated technological solutions are futile. What we are really facing is a crisis of culture - "... whatever form the future takes, it will be shaped at the local level by the mosaic of cultures that surround the globe and which contribute to the decisions that each country, community, household and individual make" (UNESCO 1997). We must finally recognise our interdependence, from the slower paced Latin America to the rapid expansion of an increasingly business orientated Asia, from the relatively youthful existence of the Baltic States to the stronghold of capitalism in Western Europe and America. This acceptance should incorporate an appreciation and respect of the complex nature of each society. Only through ongoing debate, whilst taking action, can we establish a humanitarian and sustainable way forward that is beneficial to the well-being of all.

