

# Why Responsibility? Pourquoi la responsabilité

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## **Summary:**

Responsibility is an ethical orientation to meet the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; it brings coherence to the profound paradigm shift underlying transitions to zero carbon economies before the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is a reference for accountability and governance at all scales: at national, regional and global levels.

Relational values and accountability for the human use of resources are both held within the notion of Responsibility. Public good and accountability are associated with the new order of industrialized societies, re-orientated towards stewardship of the planet and the interwoven integrity of all forms of life.

The scenarios of climate change present exponentially mounting risk. The interdependence of humans and the biosphere compels us to profound and urgent personal and systemic change to safeguard life on earth, as it has been for ten thousand years. **Read more....**

**Key Words:** Responsibility, accountability, relational, public good, global, corporate, stewardship, transitions, oeconomy, sustainable societies, interdependence.

*Responsibility grows in importance as the life of freedom discovers itself to be unjust.* Emmanuel Levinas.

## **Responsibility: a reference for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Giving priority to responsibility is to signal the paradigm shift needed to address climate change and the destabilization of planetary ecosystems, along with social inequity, and the social and environmental issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Responsibility is the foundation of community; it expresses the common destiny of peoples and planet and gives priority to public good and an orienting value for a world where people and the planet are woven together and interdependent. Responsibility comes to the fore for integrating human and environmental wellbeing into economic systems. Measures and indicators need to be developed to assist with identifying the components of responsibility and the attributes associated with it, such as public good, environmental integrity as part of economic value, and equity of wellbeing.

Responsibility is relevant for state, corporate, civil society and individual spheres.

## **Responsibility: public good, rights, accountability, interdependence**

An approach of public good needs to have an account of rights as well as of responsibility. Human rights, which mark the justice movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are assumed to be accompanied by duties, but this aspect is usually poorly articulated. It could even be said that rights face an aporia of effectiveness without an account of duty, or responsibility.

Rights are often assumed to be the basis of all arguments for justice. Rights can encompass social and environmental justice; they can also be applied legalistically for commercial entitlement. Generally rights do have an entitlement focus which can lead to conflict and contestations over rights.

Responsibility, on the other hand includes responsive and accountability dimensions; it is relationally based and invite giving precedence to the other; the other person, the river, the land, the fish and trees. It comes from recognizing that my wellbeing is intricately related to the wellbeing of the other. This is a world-view that endures in traditional and indigenous peoples' systems of social organization, and can be jeopardized by the systemic changes that accompany industrial development.

Responsibility is about authority, power, accountability and it has a custodial quality – associated with stewardship. Responsibility tends to be associated with legal liability – usually for past actions, and this makes it seem burdensome.

In the world of technology that outpaces the human capacity to know the consequences of our actions, responsibility, in the form of precaution, needs to take centre stage. Similarly in the world of climate injustice, responsibility means accountability for the future of the planet.

### **Globalized industrial expansion and irresponsibility**

In the capitalist industrial expansion we have irresponsibility at a gross scale accompanied by an ideology of freedom, which allow an inordinate capacity for private accumulation of wealth accompanied by exploitation of people and environment. The expansion of global corporate power, includes a systemic shifting of responsibility so as not to impede growth and development.

Freedom, self interest, and private property are cornerstones of this mode of operation, freedom with little or no accountability – a right without duties, private ownership without a requirement to contribute to public good. A right to property gives legal force to the idea of man as master of nature. Yet the hidden face of mastery is that man depends on nature, so property rights have to be constrained by safeguards for the environment.

In the globalized economy companies can take the lead on climate transitions and social wellbeing such as through Corporate Social Responsibility. They can also follow strategies that evade such accountabilities by operating offshore, outsource their labour and evade responsibility for working conditions in poorly regulated countries. The corporate avoidance of taxes means low contributions in high income countries and the effect of undermining the tax base of the welfare state. This means that social provisions of the state become dismantled that protections and safeguards for working people are undermined or removed.

Similarly environmental risks can be seen where regulation for environmental protection is weakened and rights to exploit are accompanied by the primacy of commodity values. The commodification of the environment has outpaced the means to regulate environmental impacts.

The state is suffering a loss of responsibility for environmental safeguards and social fabric in direct proportion to the corporate world taking to itself the economic power that gave the state its means and it's mandate to be custodians of social welfare. There are

numerous examples of disproportionate social injustice borne by marginalized groups and peoples.

In the case of corporates, we see that economic power has become disassociated from public good responsibility. The reach of globalization is decoupled from social justice – which is the basis of sustainable societies and peace.

### **Responsibility – a framework for sustainable societies**

Responsibility as a framework for sustainable societies needs to be interpreted in the multiple dimensions personal, national, corporate and global spheres. At the global scale of climate negotiations we see states clinging to sovereign self interest while climate negotiations require that this be relinquished in favour of ‘solidarity sovereignty’, as proposed by Professor Mireille Delmas Marty, Collège de France.

[The Paris Agreement](#) offers a platform for the solidarity of public good. The ambition of COP21 remains to be realized in a context where trade negotiations such as the Trans Pacific Partnership are to advance economic growth in business as usual formats. Yet, transnational corporates are central to climate responsibility, and will have to carry the transformation to renewable energy.

Education is significant for implementation of climate responsibility, and the global aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals. Hallmarks of education for responsible, interdependent and sustainable societies include knowledge development through interdisciplinarity, capacity for complex systems analysis, experiential learning, collaborative action, citizenship interests. This approach to education calls for a profound reorientation from distinct subject areas with narrow economic and employment goals.

Underlying all the transitions to sustainable societies, is the fundamental challenge of moving from current economic and energy systems, to an economy of stewardship, or ‘oconomy’ as proposed by Pierre Calame, former President, Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer in his [Essay on Oeconomy](#). Oeconomy is the ‘rules of household management with the art of putting all of the goods of nature to good use’.

Today an interdependent economic life with the simultaneously pursuit of financial, social and environmental objectives is a precept of responsible, interdependent and sustainable societies.