

## Sustainable Social Development

Lars Osberg  
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"Sustainable social development" is, like the environmental slogan "sustainable development", not easy to define exactly. Yet slogans have their uses, as ways of encapsulating and linking related issues. The objective of this essay is to argue that "sustainable social development" is a useful slogan for social policy planners, because: 1) it links the long run benefits of social policy (which are now largely ignored) to the long run financial costs of these policies (which now receive a great deal of attention); 2) it emphasizes the functional interdependence between economic and social processes, and the need for coherence between economic and social policies; 3) it draws an analogy between the natural and the social environment, which can be a useful way of understanding the implications of social policy.

The ideas of sustainable development, and sustainable social development, are attractive, yet paradoxical and ambiguous. The term "sustainable" implies an element of constancy, a preservation of the environment, yet "development" implies change. One must therefore begin with the caution that the first issue in a policy of sustainable social development is some judgement as to which aspects of society can be, and should be, sustained/preserved and which can be, or inevitably will be, changed. One might, for example, argue that a primary value in a civilized society is the right of all individuals to be free from the threat of physical violence, or that a democratic society will attempt, at a minimum, to offer equality of educational opportunity to all its citizens. People can, and

do, adapt to the absence of either condition - the affluent can, for example, hire security guards or patronize private schools, while the poor simply do without - but social policy planners cannot avoid considering whether individuals should adapt to such change. And although values such as freedom from violence or equality of educational opportunity may be uncontroversial, other values (such as the maintenance of the Cape Breton "way of life") are not. And some values of a previous age (such as whether mothers should work outside the home) have been partially discarded.<sup>1</sup> A policy of sustainable social development must therefore begin by deciding which social values are enduring social 'needs' which should be sustained and which are transient social 'wants' which can be developed.

This essay adopts the general definition of sustainable social development as 'social development which meets the social needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own social needs'.<sup>2</sup> It uses the term 'sustainable social policy' to mean social policy whose continued implementation is feasible over many years and which produces sustainable social development. In this essay, it will be assumed that the social 'needs' of Canada are spelled out in such consensus statements as the UN

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<sup>1</sup>One should note that such values were important in past program design. The objective of the 'Aid to Dependent Children' programme, when started in the U.S. in 1935, was "to release from the wage-earning role the person whose natural function is to give her children the physical and affectionate guardianship necessary not alone to keep them from falling into social misfortune, but more affirmatively to rear them into citizens capable of contributing to society" (quoted in Burtless, 1989: 106). Note that reintegration into the productive mainstream, especially for children, remains an important policy objective. What has changed is social norms about a mother's roles in that process.

<sup>2</sup>See World Commission on Environment and Development (1987: 43).

Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>3</sup> This essay will not attempt to construct an exhaustive list of the specific objectives by which such general needs can be satisfied. Rather, section 1 will discuss the idea of the 'social deficit', and the general functional interdependence between economic processes and the social environment, and the reasons why these have often been ignored. Section 2 will narrow the focus to two specific issues - unemployment and the changing job structure - as examples of issues on which a perspective of sustainable social development is particularly important. Section 3 is a conclusion.

#### 1. Economics and the Environment (Social and Natural)

Economic processes operate within, and affect, their physical environment, but for a long time the interdependence between economics and the environment was not widely recognized. Only with the accretion of pollutants has it become clear that the atmosphere and the ocean cannot costlessly be used as a limitless sink for waste disposal. Only with greater knowledge have the hazards posed by toxic chemicals become apparent. Only recently have we begun to forecast the implications of general trends, such as global warming, which will affect all aspects of economic and social life. Recognition of the importance of the natural environment has taken time because: (1) many environmental processes operate on an extremely long time scale and environmental degradation is often a process of gradual deterioration, whose effects can be masked for a very long time by the

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<sup>3</sup>It is sometimes forgotten that in addition to basic political rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights contained strong provisions for social and economic rights. Appendix A reproduces Articles 22 to 28.

background "noise" of other events; (2) individuals and communities differ widely in their susceptibility to environmental damage, hence at the early stages of environmental degradation the demise of the fragile can often be rationalized away; (3) environmental interdependence poses very complex scientific issues, whose effective analysis requires a multi-disciplinary team approach, which has been difficult to organize.

Economic processes also operate within and interact upon the social environment, but the same barriers to perception (long time scales, varying susceptibility and complexity), mean that the interdependence of economic and social processes is still not widely recognized. Yet social organization is essential for economic development. Without a framework of law, and a general willingness to obey the law, market transactions cannot be enforced. Without effective nurturing and training of each new generation, the labour force will inevitably decline in productivity. And without some insurance against the risks of economic and technical change, individuals have no good reason to cooperate in economic adjustment.

Economic processes both depend upon, and alter, their social environment. Increases in unemployment produce an increased incidence of marriage break-up, family violence and mental illness. The geographic mobility demanded by the labour market separates the nuclear from the extended family, necessitating the creation of formal institutions of childcare, elderly support and mutual assistance. Declining job opportunities in traditional blue-collar employment close historic avenues to economic security and social status. And, as we all know, the cost of social programs is a very significant component of total government expenditures.

The design problem involved in creating sustainable social policies is, therefore, two-fold. First, social policies must be designed which the economy can afford to support in the long run. The current financial deficits of federal and provincial governments and the looming burden of pension entitlements for an aging population both imply that the financial cost of social policies is a central concern. And it is no longer realistic to look only at short-term budgetary implications, with the blithe assumption that economic growth will solve the revenue problem in the long term.

However, the second imperative, to sustain a given level of economic activity, is that economic and social policies must be designed which will maintain the "social capital" on which economic processes depend. One cannot complacently assume that "all else will remain the same," since deterioration of the social environment can be very costly. When crime rates rise, all citizens bear the costs of crime, both as victims and as the purchasers of security services to avoid victimization. As the level of mistrust and class conflict increases, and the collective bargaining environment deteriorates, the economy bears the cost of declining labour productivity and increasing strike incidence. As the nuclear family splits from the extended family, and begins, itself, to fragment, society is forced to provide alternative institutions to supply childcare, support of the disabled, and care for the elderly. To the extent that society as a whole is allowing the social environment to deteriorate, we are in a very real sense running a "social deficit", and storing up a national debt of social problems whose eventual remedy will be just as expensive as our environmental problems.

Social policy designers would like to minimize the tradeoff between financial and social deficits, but they also have to choose the priority they attach to each. However, the

contest is uneven. The financial deficit of government is a one-dimensional problem which is easily quantifiable, easily understandable and immediately relevant to this year's taxation and expenditure decisions. The social deficit, on the other hand, is a multi-dimensional problem, which is hard to quantify, the result of complex interactions among people and very long run in its implications. With each passing year, the social deficit accumulates, but only when its manifestations become unmistakable, as in the death of large sections of the American inner city, does it begin to attract media and public attention.

In addition, it is unlikely that one can "pay back" the social debt as easily as one can repay financial debts. In 1946/47 the net public debt of the Government of Canada was 106.6% of GNP, but a decade of rapid growth and a series of budgetary surpluses reduced the national debt to 35.7% of GNP by 1956/57, essentially eliminating this economic problem for the next quarter century.<sup>4</sup> It is very hard to find major social problems which can be eliminated in a comparable period of time -- indeed, many social processes may not be reversible at all. Yet the focus of media attention is firmly on the financial deficits of government.

Delayed attention to the social deficit is in part due to the fact that many social processes operate on a time-scale of generations, rather than in terms of weeks or months.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In 1991 the federal debt stood at 50.9% of GNP, a considerable increase from 19.0% of GNP in 1976/77. See Perry (1989: 466).

<sup>5</sup>But the impacts of social processes can cumulate dramatically within a period as short as a decade. Wacquant and Wilson (1989) document the disintegration of the American inner city between 1970 and 1980. In these 10 years, Chicago, for example, lost 3,212 factories and 269,000 manufacturing jobs, as well as 111,000 jobs in retail and wholesale trade, and 9% of its population (32% of its white population). The number of families on welfare rose by 95%. Crime rates, drug dependence and a host of other ills

The Head Start program in the United States was initiated in the 1960s on the hypothesis that enrichment of the pre-school environment of disadvantaged children could make a major difference in their lives. Early evaluation results were based on initial experiences in the school system, and were not encouraging. It has taken another 15 years for Head Start children to become young adults and for the differences in their eventual incomes and employment rates to show up in the data. More recent evaluations of enriched early childhood education programs are much more optimistic.<sup>6</sup> But it takes a generation to find this out -- and, conversely, it will take a generation for the effects of substandard daycare in Canada to begin to show up in the achievement of new entrants to the labour force, and many more years before these effects filter through the labour force as a whole.

Many interactions between economic processes and the natural environment also operate on long time scales -- for example, the accelerated erosion of Prairie topsoil caused by modern farming techniques. However, the erosion of social assets, such as nurturance of the young, the "work ethic", respect for law, or a sense of social responsibility is particularly difficult to track, in part because measurement is often costly. In the United States, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics has surveyed the economic experiences and social attitudes of parents, and by follow-up interviews with their children, has traced their implications for the next generation's behaviour, as adolescents and as young adults, but such research takes a long time, a lot of money -- and vision.

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continue to escalate.

<sup>6</sup>Halpern (1982:30); Glazer (1986).

Assessment of the costs of the social deficit is complicated further by the fact that individuals differ so widely in their vulnerability to a deteriorating social environment. Mental illness is, for example, a cruel burden for those who suffer from it, as well as a major cost to the healthcare system. In some disorders there is a genetic component, in the sense of a genetically inherited potential predisposition. Such a predisposition may remain latent, or within tolerable bounds, in individuals who are fortunate enough to be born into nurturing, stable family environments or lucky enough to avoid a series of highly stressful events later in life. Similarly, many (most?) marriages have problems, but these problems can remain tolerable if external stresses are manageable.

In both cases, however, a series of economic stresses, like long-term unemployment or poverty, can have a major irreversible impact on some individuals, while others can "shrug it off". Increases in unemployment have been shown to have direct effects on hospital admissions for mental illness and on marital breakup,<sup>7</sup> both of which also have a second round impact on the children of affected families. But since it is the combination of vulnerability and stress that determines which individuals are so heavily affected by economic events, their misfortune is explained away by some as due to personal moral deficiency.

Some social communities also appear to be more vulnerable than others. Many native Indian and Inuit communities in Canada exhibit high rates of welfare dependence, alcoholism, family violence and suicide, and it is clear that these problems do not simply "get better with time". The same list of social ills can be observed in isolated rural

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<sup>7</sup>The seminal study is Brenner (1973). Ketso (1988) surveys the literature.

communities which have been deprived of their major industry and of their most highly skilled inhabitants by the end of their resource base or the shifting tides of the world market place.

Environmentalists have often observed that at low levels of pollution only a few fragile individuals succumb, but beyond a certain threshold increased dosages produce a very rapid increase in impacts. Much the same is often true of the implications of social stress. However, if low dosages have low costs, the danger is that one will initially ignore the implications of the accumulation of dosages, even if it is much more expensive to try to "clean up afterwards" when society is over the threshold of sensitivity, and large numbers of people are heavily affected.

Social problems are, in one sense, more difficult to analyze than environmental problems, because problems like welfare dependency provoke much more ideology, and much less informed comment, than problems such as acid rain. Intellectually, both problems are similar, in that both involve complex systems of interaction among many variables, whose effective analysis requires the collaboration of specialists from a number of disciplines, in a context where controlled experiments are not generally feasible. However, in another sense, these problems are very different, since far more people think they know something about welfare dependency than think they understand acid rain.

People who think they already know the answers are usually unwilling to pay to find new knowledge, and the accumulation of knowledge about social issues is expensive. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics has now been running for over twenty years and by reinterviewing the same sample of American families every year has been able to track the

families which became dependent on social assistance and identify when they go on and off social assistance, and whether their children tend to become dependent on social assistance. Contrary to many stereotypes, welfare recipiency is not something limited to a small "hardcore". Over a 10 year period, a substantial fraction of American families are dependent on social assistance at some point. Analysis of Canadian administrative data reveal the same picture -- many people need social assistance at some point in their lives, for short periods (see ECC, 1990). -- but Canada has not, up to now been willing to finance this sort of long term effort which the PS1D represents.

The PS1D data indicates that in the U.S., in analysis of social assistance issues, it is essential to distinguish carefully between those who are in receipt of benefits at a particular point in time, and those who ever become dependent on social assistance. The majority of those who ever claim welfare leave the rolls within two years, but the majority of those who are on welfare at a particular point in time are long duration recipients, who account for most of programme expenditure.<sup>8</sup> However, analysis of the duration dependence of social assistance receipt was simply not possible until a longitudinal data base had been acquired. And without data, the debate on welfare dependence is necessarily conducted in terms of stereotypes and impressions.

Without a long history of data collection on temperature and rainfall, the debate on climate change or acid rain would similarly still be conducted at the level of impressions and "experienced judgements". Our recognition of the importance of the natural environment for economic prosperity has resulted in a greater effort being expended on collecting data

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<sup>8</sup>See Bane and Ellwood (1986).

about the natural environment, over many years. It has long been apparent that fertile soil, abundant fisheries, rich ore bodies and virgin forests produce wealth and the information acquisition required for the management of these assets has given society a head start in recognizing the unforeseen costs of economic impacts on the natural environment.

Indeed, the traditional explanation for Canadian affluence has been the abundance of our natural resource base. However, resource abundance can only be part of the explanation of Canadian affluence, since it can only explain the initial affluence of a resource extraction society, which Canada ceased to be some decades ago.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in the 1920s, Argentina was as rich a nation as Canada, and it remains a country equally blessed with natural resources. Yet political instability and economic stagnation have been characteristic of Argentinian life for the past 40 years. Although Japan's resource endowment is pitifully small compared to that of Canada, its social cohesiveness, from its opening to the outside world in the 1860s to the present day, has been legendary -- and today Japan dominates many world financial and product markets.

Increasingly, world trade is dominated by the exchange of knowledge -- intensive commodities. It has become a cliché to say that Canada's future in the world no longer depends on the extraction of natural resources, but rather on our ability to innovate, adapt to technical change and increase productivity. But it has not been widely recognized that this is really just another way of saying that social organization is now the fundamental

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<sup>9</sup>The service sector accounted for 71% of total employment in 1988, compared to 64% in 1971 and 45% in 1951.

national resource, and that deterioration of a nation's social fabric represents the depreciation of its most important asset.

## 2.1 Specific Issues: Unemployment.

During the 1980s, unemployment in Canada averaged 8.3%, a considerable increase from the 6.7% average of the 1970s, which was itself an increase from 5.0% in the 1960s and 4.2% in the 1950s. As well, during the 1980s unemployment in Canada became much more unequally distributed across regions of the country and increasingly dominated by long term unemployment. Since some other nations have avoided similar trends, we know that this was not inevitable. Furthermore, a remedy is well known, because it has long been recognized that lower interest rates or greater expenditure by governments provide short run stimulus to economic activity and increase employment. However, since the early 1980s, fiscal and monetary policy in Canada has been preoccupied with the control of inflation and with the financial deficit of the federal government.

In economic discussions of the decision to tolerate higher unemployment in Canada, it is often recognized that an increase in unemployment will produce increased poverty and greater income inequality. However, the slogan of macroeconomic planners has been one of "short-term pain for long-run gain" and has been motivated by the hypothesis that there is a unique non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment,<sup>10</sup> so that once price inflation has been reduced to zero, and the federal deficit is under control, the economy will be able to "get back on track". Implicitly, the argument is that higher unemployment reduces inflationary pressures in the economy in the short run, but causes no long term damage to Canada's social institutions or productive economic potential.

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<sup>10</sup>For a sceptical view, see Setterfield, Gordon and Osberg (1992).

The "social deficit", i.e. the depreciation of the social environment caused by unemployment, appears nowhere in macroeconomic calculations. Higher unemployment causes irreversible harm to some individuals, in that the stress of unemployment entails an increased incidence of mental (and physical) illness and marital breakup. When jobs are not available, the skills of the unemployed deteriorate with lack of use, government training programmes for the disadvantaged lose their point and attempts to reintegrate the handicapped, ex-convicts and other marginalized individuals into the mainstream become a cruel mockery. When there is a queue of qualified applicants available, employers have much less incentive to invest in the training of their work force, or to take a chance on trying to upgrade disadvantaged workers. Higher unemployment rates heighten the inequality between young workers and established workers who have the protection of seniority, and robs many younger workers of the chance to develop the skills, motivation and habits of work required by the job market. When jobs are scarce, any existing job becomes a valuable asset, implying a decrease in voluntary job mobility, a general trend to "risk avoidance" and an accent on job security in collective bargaining. All these trends work together to decrease the investment of society in new skills and training and to create, in areas of especially severe unemployment, self-perpetuating pockets of social decay.

In many ways, the decision to run a high unemployment economy represents a decision that an increasing social deficit can be tolerated. In looking at the international evidence of unemployment, it is not difficult to pick out particular local economies (e.g., Cape Breton, Northern Ireland) which have been characterized by extreme levels of unemployment for many years. In these areas, "life goes on" and social institutions adapt,

in a myriad of ways, to the general unavailability of paid employment. However, this is not what one would aim for under a policy of "sustainable social development".

## 2.2 The Changing Job Structure

Canadians can choose their fiscal and monetary policies, but global technological change is beyond our control -- we are limited to choosing the way Canada adapts to technological change. The long-run trend to declining employment in resource extraction has meant that by 1989, only 25.9 percent of Canadian employment was in the goods producing industries. The shift to services employment has, however, had two distinct aspects: (1) the increasing importance of the managerial/professional/technical group of relatively well paid knowledge-based occupations and (2) the growth in poorly paid, insecure jobs in personal services and retail trade.

This trend to a polarized job structure carries with it the potential to increase considerably the latent class divisions of Canadian society. In some ways we are returning to an earlier era. In the 1890s, the rich employed maids and cooks while in the 1990s, yuppies hire Molly Maid and eat out a lot. Although the arm's length nature of modern personal service employment usually insulates the affluent from direct personal contact with the servant class, this is unlikely to prevent rising resentment among the disadvantaged.

The cohort of young workers who entered the labour force in the 1980s were unlucky enough to come just after the "baby boom" generation. They have lacked the protection of seniority from the shocks of the recessions of 1981/83 and 1990/?, the continued high unemployment of the Canada's hinterland and ongoing structural change. Many will not acquire significant private pension entitlement -- both because there are no

private pensions for most personal service workers and because where they do exist instability of employment combined with incomplete vesting will deprive many of benefits. If the decline in the relative wages of young workers<sup>11</sup> represents a permanent decline in their earnings (as was the case for those who entered the labour force in the 1930s) many will find it difficult to save privately for their retirement. Through the tax system, today's young workers will be compelled to pay the unfunded liabilities of the Canada Pension Plan when the baby boom cohort retires. However, given current pension policy a significant fraction of this "small generation" will have to anticipate very low incomes in their own old age. Surely, reform of the pension system in Canada must be part of "sustainable social development".

As many have noted,<sup>12</sup> the growth of well-paid knowledge service occupations has been concentrated in Canada's major urban centres. Indeed, the resource hinterland has suffered both an erosion of traditional well-paid blue collar employment and increasing truncation of its white collar occupational structure, as advances in informatics have made it increasingly feasible to centralize office and professional functions and to administer dispersed work sites electronically. Endemic high unemployment in isolated rural areas, a truncated structure of local opportunities for the relatively well-educated, selective out migration of the better educated and the more enterprising -- all this represents a recipe for rural stagnation, and increasing dependence on transfer payments.

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<sup>11</sup>See Myles (1988).

<sup>12</sup>e.g. Economic Council of Canada (1991 -- Chapter 2)

Furthermore, one ought to recognize that Canadian multi-culturalism has, in the last twenty years, largely been an urban phenomenon. Immigrants have been disproportionately attracted to Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, producing an increasing ethnic cleavage between the Canadian hinterland and Canada's major urban centers, which has the potential to align with an increasing economic and social cleavage. Surely a policy of sustainable social development would try to forestall the political stresses of these coincident cleavages with a conscious policy of rural development.

### 3. Conclusion

Section I argued that because deterioration of the social environment operates slowly, impinges initially on the vulnerable and is complex to analyze, the importance of the social environment has often not been recognized. These same problems of perception obscured the importance of deterioration in the natural environment for many years, but the accumulation of data on the extent of deterioration in the natural environment, and the processes which caused it, has made the natural environment a central political issue.

One of the themes running through Section I is that unless society invests in the acquisition of information on the social environment and analysis of the processes which cause it to change, we will not recognize when the social environment deteriorates or realize why. A policy of sustainable social development would imply that we try to anticipate possible deterioration in the social environment, since a general moral from our experience with the natural environment is that it is usually much cheaper to avoid harming the environment, rather than attempting to clean it up after the fact. At the moment, however, debates on social issues are dominated by rhetoric. Because we do not invest

enough in analyzing the social environment, social phenomena such as illiteracy appear as mysterious to us as cholera appeared to our ancestors. At present, we know much more about Canadian rocks than we know about Canadian illiterates -- even though our future well-being depends far more on knowledge than on resources. Hence, a first step in "sustainable social development" should be a much greater attempt to understand the interactions between economic development and the social environment which makes it possible.

Section II looked at two specific issues on which there is already some evidence concerning the relationship between the economy and the social environment. In macro economic policy-making, the relative importance placed on unemployment has been assessed with little or no calculation of the long-run social costs of a series of short-run economic decisions--a mode of decision-making which has often proved disastrous for the natural environment, and offers no better prospect of success for the social environment. Similarly, policies of adjustment to technological change have generally been framed purely in terms of increasing the flexibility of the labour force, with little consideration to needs for security, or the potential of structural change for intergenerational conflict and regional alienation. If nothing else, the ecology movement should teach us to be sensitive to the interdependence of the processes essential for sustainable social development.

Because the connection between social policy and economic productivity is often unrecognized, this essay has emphasized the importance of the social environment for long-run economic productivity. However, one must also stress that our social environment -- e.g. the level of crime, the quality of social and familial relations, the extent of class

conflicts -- is also a very large component of that hard-to-measure thing we often call "the quality of life". The social environment therefore affects our individual well-being directly, in providing many of the "services" which really matter to people, as well as indirectly, in enabling the market economy to function effectively. For both reasons, we need to emphasize policies of sustainable social development.

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## APPENDIX A

Universal Declaration of Human Rights United Nations, Dec. 10, 1948.

## Article 22

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

## Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

## Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

## Article 25

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other loss of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

## Article 26

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

## Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interest resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

## Article 28

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

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