The Pursuit of Sustainability
Through the Self-Transformation and the Collective Well-Being

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Abstract

The fundamental factor to realize sustainability of the environment and human life lies in the condition of our self. This article discusses a comparative analysis between the sustainable self and unsustainable self in order to clarify the conditions required to achieve sustainability. The sustainable self can be consciously constructed through raising social actions and forging social relationships. The author suggests a transformative approach to the sustainable self drawing on the concepts in indigenous culture, Buddhism philosophy and deep ecology. The idea of collective well-being is suggested as a human capability to perceive a unity of well-being in our self with that of others. The condition of sustainability is promoted through the approach to collective well-being in social relationships. A case study of collective action is introduced as a dynamic transformation in practice to foster the sustainable self in individuals and community. The author utilizes a transformative approach to cultivating the sustainable self in a pedagogical development.
As people have become aware of the unsustainable environmental conditions, which have posed a major threat to human living, sustainability becomes a vital area of research and strategies among scholars, educators and political leaders. In his ongoing Five-Year Action Agenda, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stated the following: “Environmental, economic and social indicators tell us that our current model of progress is unsustainable. Ours is a world of looming challenges and increasingly limited resources. Sustainable development offers the best chance to adjust our course” (United Nations, 2012).

Sustainable development now becomes an accepted agenda by over 150 nations through advocacies since The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) known as Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Rolston, 2012). However, these agendas, which entail a political struggle in the pursuit of economic development, have not affected a radical development in environmental quality. This is because when sustainability is linked with the term development, a conflict arises with an economical pursuit recognized as a major factor of unsustainability. The combined term of sustainable and development refers to a pursuit of current economic development only to an extent which does not deteriorate the life of future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). While sustainable development is more and more acknowledged as a major strategy for sustainability, the term development coupled with sustainability needs another perspective when seeking what is fundamentally required for sustainability. This paper refers to the development in terms of individuals’ development as a fundamental approach to sustainability with a focus on how individuals can define and transform their own selves, which practically becomes a fundamental factor in attaining
sustainability. The author analyzes the ontological definition of human beings in the relation to the environment through various approaches, but mainly from two distinctive perspectives, namely the sustainable self and unsustainable self. Several researchers attempted to define the sustainable self through philosophical investigation. For instance, animism is suggested as an idea to overcome an objective perspective of dualism between sentient and insentient matters and consider our own identity as a part of nature (Bai, 2015). Other traditional approaches are observed in the concepts derived from indigenous and Buddhist perspectives, which consider natural and social phenomena as a reflection of the self. On the other hand, the external approach to constructing the self is analyzed through the influences of the social, cultural and economic norms. For example, Assadourian (2010) affirms that the institutions such as policy, media, and school form the cultural ideology of consumerism in the human mind. This correlation between individual attitude and the environment is observed in the progress of civilization of capitalism, which causes a rebellion of nature against human beings who have been developing technology from agriculture to industry without sufficient care for the environment (Wright, 2004). The investigation of external influences shows what factors are lacking to promote sustainability by revealing the primary factor of unsustainable culture in our attitude.

This paper first attempts a comparative analysis of the sustainable self on its conditions in contrast to those of the unsustainable self. While the sustainable self defines the ontological position where a human being can act in accordance with sustainability principles, the unsustainable self is analyzed as preventive factors of human beings from promoting sustainability, mainly derived from ego-centric nature. This distinction between the sustainable and unsustainable self clarifies the approaches
to and the elements of the sustainable self. Then, a transformative approach to the sustainable self from unsustainable self is discussed based on an analysis of altruism. The sustainable self is also developed through actions for collective well-being achieved by the recognition of well-being of others as our own. Through this approach, sustainability is suggested as a condition achieved through collective well-being in which individuals set a goal to promote the well-being of others. The sustainable self in this manner can be realized with the practice of collective actions in social relationships. An investigation of ethical development in virtue ethics supports the idea of action as a fundamental factor in fostering the sustainable self. Given that the author describes an active role of sustainable self with an example of collective actions in a dynamic interlink of the transformation of individuals, community and global. Some researchers argue that sustainability entails a transformative process of human consciousness (Cohen, Bai, & Rabi, 2014). Finally, this article introduces a pedagogical approach to developing the sustainable self.

The Unsustainable Self

The idea of sustainability arose from the notion of the current situation of unsustainability primarily caused by human attitude, which pursues economic development with less consideration of an impact on the environmental system. However, the lack of care is considerably observed in our consumerism, which does not appreciate conservation of natural resources. Human beings as the primary cause of unsustainable environmental conditions need to recognize their own self first in order to identify problems and solution within themselves.

The critique of dualism was raised as an issue of the separation of humans and nonhumans, which led to negative consequences for the environment (Bai, 2015). While
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the connection with nature is an important aspect of the sustainable self, however, the acknowledgment of this distinction is the onset of ontological investigation of the sustainable self, as it can clarify the root cause of unsustainability. The theory of dependent origination in the philosophy of Buddhism reveals the root cause of environmental issues in negative aspects of human beings such as self-interest attitude to pursue their own desire (Bandarage, 2013). Unless we manage to subvert the greed, major crisis of environmental hazards will be inevitable and will threaten lives in future generations. The ecological footprint indicates that we are consuming natural resources equivalent to what 1.3 Earths can supply (Assadourian, 2010). What lies in this overconsumption and ignorance to the well-being of future generations originates from the subjective desire and objective interest of human beings. Therefore, our survival depends on the shift of interest from capital to nature (Wright, 2004).

On the contrary, various factors of consumerism arose from the modern culture, which stimulates individuals to raise the sense of contentment through the consumption of goods and services (Assadourian, 2010). Consumerism is deeply embedded in the human mind, which forms a set of cultural values and influences our decisions in daily life. The issues of sustainability are inseparable from global and cultural norms, which determines the social and economic structure and processes (Taylor, 2008). This unsustainable culture is observed as a prevailing global culture, which is composed of a collection of the unsustainable selves that are unconsciously embedded in the modern way of living within a capitalist consumer society.

The roots of consumerism lie in an integrated system of institutional roles in the commercial market, media, government, and education; therefore, what is required is a change in the system so that individuals can aspire to promote their well-being
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through sustainable attitude (Assadourian, 2010). On the other hand, the unsustainable self is an analysis of an individual condition of unsustainability. In this regard, Bellah (1992) claims that individuals’ autonomy and actions are the most fundamental component of institutions. According to him, therefore, the meaning of democracy cannot be confined to the idea of merely representing the government but essentially attached to the participation of all citizens in the process. In this manner, the democratic progress must engage citizens who are aware of their responsibility to combat social injustice (Bellah, 1992). Although the consumerism can be promoted by the ideology and institutions, we need to be aware of the fact that the true challenge for transforming the system lies in an individual’s challenge against environmental injustice derived from the human desire for power and wealth. Therefore, sustainability depends on transformation of the individuals’ nature of unsustainable self into the one that contributes to a sustainable future. Table 1 below is a comparison of the concepts of the sustainable and the unsustainable self and suggests how the approach of individuals’ transformation can be brought about. The shift to the sustainable self is required to be consciously constructed in its transformation through an action-oriented process of having a connection with others and nature. This paper suggests that the transformation is an essential approach to dealing with the serious cause for unsustainability within us. As the unsustainable self is unconsciously embedded in dominant cultural patterns, individuals would fall into the trap of consumerism without consciously monitoring our own self. The following sections discuss various approaches in detail to developing the sustainable self.

Table 1: Comparison between the sustainable self and the unsustainable self
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<th></th>
<th>Formation</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainable self</td>
<td>Consciously</td>
<td>Action oriented</td>
<td>Connected or oneness with nature</td>
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<td></td>
<td>developed</td>
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<td>Unsustainable self</td>
<td>Unconsciously</td>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td>Disconnected with nature</td>
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**Attaining Oneness with Nature**

The sustainable self is constructed with our conscious awareness of the relationship with nature in a way that aims at oneness of the self with the environment. Attaining oneness with nature attempts to develop a conceptual approach for the self to confront an ecological imbalance caused by the pursuit of consumerism and industrialization. Some researchers challenge the conceptual separation or dualism between human beings and nature as a step toward attaining our oneness with nature. For instance, Bai (2015) takes an internal approach to construct the oneness through animism in order to overcome the dualism and to define human beings as a part of nature. According to her, animism requires our conscious perception to perceive the whole entity as a living being and denies the separation of sentient and insentient beings. The self of animism is attained through internal transformation by meditation which leads the mind to discern oneness in all entities as living beings (Bai, 2015). Bai’s methodology to attain the oneness takes a spiritual approach but experiential through her own experience of nature. York and Becker (2012) state that the oneness of nature and nonhuman beings can be developed through encountering and experiencing nature.

Animism resonates with the indigenous approach to spiritual identity. An indigenous legend eloquently reveals our spiritual condition as a manifestation of the physical world (Atleo, 2004). In this sense, the current environmental condition is considered a reflection of our spiritual condition. Therefore, the environment is seen as
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a mirror of our spiritual condition through which we can identify the current condition of human beings. This reflective self that is identified through the environment has practical value, as the notion raises motivation to act for sustainability. In other words, the natural environment reveals to us our own identity and awakens our responsible role to promote sustainability with awareness about the interrelated condition between serious environmental issues and us. The idea of the reflective self resonates with that of deep ecology proposed by Naess (1989). Ecosophy, as named by Naess, is a primary approach of deep ecology to attain ecological harmony or equilibrium. Ecosophy does not consider humans and the environment as being the same thing but suggests philosophical inquiries in order to cultivate our intellectual capacity to recognize things surrounding us within ourselves (Naess, 1989). This internal approach of self-definition overcomes dualism in defining our own self as the one with all other beings within.

A Buddhist perspective also refers to the oneness of life and its environment in a similar conception to that of the indigenous approach but takes an approach to understanding the relationship through multiple perspectives. In other words, life and the environment are recognized as two entities in phenomena, but they are one in essence (Garrison, Hickman & Ikeda, 2014). This idea notes that all living beings and the environment are constantly changing through influencing one another. According to Ikeda (2010), the relationship is mutually interrelated through the intricate connections of the whole entity in which both human conditions and environmental phenomenon are reflections of the other. For instance, he illustrates a series of environmental issues and effects as a reflection of an ill-being of the human spirit; therefore, the ego-centric attitude manifests itself in depletion of natural resources in the environment and then becomes the perils of human life. In sum, the relationship between us and the
The pursuit of sustainability environment is connected by causality according to the Buddhism theory of dependent origination, which affirms that all environmental events including human attitudes are related by cause and effect (Ikeda, 2010).

The sustainable self takes the individuals’ self-centered approach to sustainability with the considerable significance of the individual self as a primary cause for a change in the environment. The sense of our common mission for sustainability needs to be acknowledged in the awareness of our role and responsibility for the life and environment through which the sustainable self can be highly motivated to act for sustainability. Therefore, it is crucial for this argument to consider methods to develop the sustainable self. The next section will discuss some such methods.

**Transformative Self in Social Relationships**

Naess (2005) introduces the ecological self which emerges through the transformation of the self from ego-centric to altruistic. In his study, this transformative process is considered a process of realizing inner potential, namely self-realization. However, he argues that achieving the state of altruism is not through denying ego or its desires but through the transformation of our selfish desire into a desire to care for others. Our desire cannot be denied as an essential part of human nature but can be maintained properly as a fundamental force of our actions (Naess, 2005). In this manner, self-realization takes a process of self transformation, which is achieved through realizing the unity of needs in altruistic actions illustrated in the following situations.

We sometimes observe a situation of helping others solely with our own wish with no consideration of needs of others. This ego-centered altruism is not genuine altruism because we are not able to truly respond to the needs of others with consideration of their feeling and situation but responding only to our own desire to do
so. In order to fulfill the goal of altruism, which truly benefits others, we need to transform our selfish desire to the one with which we can truly understand and respond to the needs of others. The unity of needs, which considers the needs of others as our own needs, helps transform the self to realize the oneness of needs in the actions to enhance the conditions of the sustainable self within us. Another obstacle to realizing a genuine altruism is the fear of self-sacrifice. In order to avoid the fear of altruistic action, the oneness of needs is achieved through collective self-realization in which the self can take positive actions for others as the benefit of our own self transformation. It is a transformation of our own ego as an obstacle of self-realization to an opportunity of it. According to Naess (2005), this self was attained through cultivating our insight to grasp “the essential oneness of all life” (p. 524). A non-dual approach to overcoming ego is observed in a discourse of Vokey (2011) who explains ego as the self-centered mind in Buddhism with which we cannot be attentive to others’ well-being. He also points out that the ego arises from the anxiety of separation in our existence. In other words, when we lose our own identity apart from an interconnected-self, our mind functions in a self-centered manner. The state of egoless can be achieved with the state of non-duality, which perceives no discrimination between antithetical concepts or objects.

A transformative approach to egoism is introduced in an indigenous legend, which provides an idea of challenging our negative nature by realizing a positive force through helping others (Hart, 2002). This approach resonates with the idea of Naess (2005) that self-realization requires a step from ego to a social and ecological self through an altruistic action such as sharing. The significance of helping or sharing is recognized as a way to nurture the relationship (Hart, 2002). As Naess (2005) states, the
act of sharing works as a counter force of egoism, and it can also enhance the sense of connection with others through which collective healing of family and community could take place. The social connection helps us to elevate the potential to realize collective self-realization through which individuals can act for the benefit of others as their own benefit.

This transformative approach to the sustainable self through deep ecology, Buddhism and indigenous perspectives can be understood as collective self-realization, which is achieved through the state of non-duality with a recognition of the whole of others within ourselves. The sustainable self can be manifested in a pursuit of collective self-realization in which individuals can perceive others’ well-being as their own well-being. The next section introduces the approach to enhancing collective well-being through forging social connections as a way to realize the sustainable self.

**Collective Well-being - A Path to Sustainability**

Research evidence shows that social relationships are important factors to enhance well-being (The Government Office for Science, London, 2008). For instance, enhancement of life satisfaction is observed in the achievement of altruistic goals for helping others and of life goals set within the social relationship (Headey, 2008). Subjective well-being can be mutually enhanced through developing social relationships, but requires a non-dualistic perspective of oneness in the self and others as a condition for realizing genuine altruism. The non-dualistic perspective of well-being appears in the idea of Mahayana Buddhism, which teaches the way of bodhisattva to attain Buddhahood. Bodhisattva, who embodies compassion, transcends ego and distinctions between self and others (Vokey, 2011). This perspective resonates with the idea of deep ecology which guides us to recognize things surrounding us within ourselves. The
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collective well-being is the oneness of well-being realized by the mutual enhancement of well-being.

In Buddhism, the compassion of the bodhisattva manifests itself in an ethical and sympathetic way of life through perceiving the dignity of all living beings; therefore, people in the state of the bodhisattva can confront social adversities as an opportunity to promote the well-being of others and themselves (Ikeda, 2010). This idea suggests an approach to sustainability through the transformation of unsustainability with the state of compassion in the pursuit of the collective well-being. The non-dualistic approach to well-being transcends the concept of well-being as an individual condition of life and assists in realizing mutual enhancement of well-being. This approach to promoting our collective well-being can also assist the progress toward a common goal for humanity (e.g., sustainability, peace, human rights).

This paper acknowledges individuals’ actions for collective well-being as their fundamental attitude to promote sustainable living. In the field of community psychology, a concept of community well-being suggests a comprehensive approach to community development through assuring environmental factors, which underpin individual well-beings (Kagan & Kilroy, 2007). Moreover, sustainable development has been integrated into the promotion of well-being, as the measurement of sustainability has been examined by the analysis of well-being (Dietz, Rosa, & York, 2009). This analysis can support a possibility of the mutual enhancement between well-being and sustainability. The mutual connection is realized through the perspective of the collective well-being, which does not signify the well-being of individuals but our capabilities to promote the well-being of the whole environment.

Murray (2011) proposed the sustainable self in six components: “Awareness,”
“Motivation,” “Empowerment,” “Knowledge,” “Skillful Means,” and “Practice.” In my analysis, the self can be constructed through engaging ourselves in each component. For instance, awareness is an activity to learn the real situation of the world through which we can acquire knowledge. The awareness and knowledge motivate us to respond to the needs of the world in practical actions for enhancing collective well-being. In this flow, one action causes another action creating a ripple effect through empowering others to take action. Skillful means can be developed in the actions of applying knowledge into practice. In the same manner, all of these components are enhanced through fostering social relationships, as Murray (2011) states that social capital, which contributes to individual well-being, is enhanced through forging social relationships. Therefore, the sustainable self is developed in the moment of taking personal actions for collective well-being through fostering the social relationship for sustainability.

Constructing the Sustainable Self through Collective Actions

Virtue ethics suggests that people can cultivate their virtues through practical experiences and social interactions (Aristotle, 2000). In general, the interactions with and reflection of other social members in a community can be considered the part of an educational process of developing our morality. Therefore, individuals’ engagement in social relationships can promote their virtues as components of their sustainable self. Promotion of environmental sustainability is possible with the process of cultivating the virtue through ethical practice (York & Becker, 2012). The idea of virtue ethics resonates with that of bodhisattva who acts with compassion and sympathy based upon human virtue. The similarity between Buddhist and Aristotelian virtue ethics is recognized in a practical approach to responding to a situation based upon moral stigma (Vockey, 2011). The comparative analysis of approaches to the practice of bodhisattva
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and virtue ethics clarifies the significance of action as a determinant of realizing human virtues which cultivate the sustainable self.

A practical approach to developing the sustainable self through collective social actions can be observed in the Green Belt Movement initiated by Wangari Maathai. She is the first recipient of the Nobel Peace prize as a result of her community-based environmental movement, which planted over 30 million trees in Kenya and other countries in Africa. The significance of this achievement does not lie in the number of trees but people’s empowerment to raise the sense of responsibility for their own lives and the environment (Ikeda, 2012). This movement represents an example of developing the character of sustainable self through collective actions of people in a community. This achievement represents an ideal process of developing the sustainable self through fostering both types of the relationship among local people and with nature at the same time. Environmental sustainability cannot be achieved by an action of a single individual but requires a large scale movement of global individuals in a long-term cooperation (Ikeda, 2012). Therefore, the mission of the sustainable self is to expand the self from one to another so that a large number of people can be involved in the movement to carry out the mission to realize a sustainable future. The collective actions enable people to empower the inner capability of others and foster unity among people who work to achieve the common goal.

In general, environmental issues are considered as global issues, which are of concerns to all individuals in the global community. Nevertheless, the prime point of global transformation is the fact that community actions are the starting point of global change (Garrison et al., 2014). Therefore, forging an interrelationship between local and global is a practical factor to realize sustainability. Practical application of the idea of
the collective well-being is observed as a dynamic interlink between local and global movement. A single individual action or change can cause not only a transformation at the individual level but also expand it to others in a community and global as a collective transformation. A personal transformation as a way to realize the fundamental components of human beings occurs simultaneously with a dynamic process of transformation in a social system (Takahashi, 2004). The process of education for sustainability should be taken through this transformative approach to bring about an individual change as the fundamental change at the community and global levels. The sustainable self has this profound mission to realize this dynamic transformation.

**The Pedagogy for the Sustainable Self**

The sustainable self takes a process of its development through collective actions to awaken individuals' potential and role to promote sustainability. This process requires cultivating the potential through raising the human virtue in a transformative approach to the sustainable self. The methodologies to construct the sustainable self through the transformation of the inner self with ethical virtue and the social actions in reality converge into an educational implementation in practice. This section attempts to develop a pedagogical approach to foster the essential components of the sustainable self, which are described in the previous sections. The pedagogy of the sustainable self is to be devised in order to promote sustainability through realizing ethical motivation for collective well-being in their mind and collective action in their practice.

First, the pedagogy for the sustainable self maintains a holistic perspective toward the relationship between nature and human beings. The consequence of education, like a two-edged sword, defines our perspective to see only from a single side and expand our idea with alternative views. For instance, Davis (2009) shows a
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case that people who are educated with an objective approach to nature in science education would have an understanding of the forest as natural resources for producing logs. On the contrary, he points out that indigenous people can acquire a sense of reverence for nature due to the education through their heritage, which appreciates the value of nature. Education might place an obstacle to sustainability but also fosters our holistic sense of understanding nature. In order to avoid a negative consequence of education, however, the pedagogy needs to provide ideas and experiences which help learners to understand nature in a holistic manner.

Therefore, the pedagogy of the sustainable self takes the Middle Way approach to the self for the enhancement of holistic learning, namely a combination of internal and external development of the self in the pedagogy. The Middle Way is a concept of Buddhism, which helps to prevent the self from inclining to an extreme, and resonates with Dewey’s idea of inner human potential to be recognized in thought and actualized in reality (Garrison et al., 2014). The internal approach takes a process of recognizing the inner virtue of the self while the external approach takes its process of actualizing the self through actions in social relationships. The two approaches are applied in combination like virtue ethics to assist our ethical development through actions.

Second, the pedagogy for sustainable self is an approach to raising the individual potential to realize sustainability in the collective well-being. In order to achieve this goal, the methodology is to be implemented in a way to assist people in nurturing a good relationship with others and the environment. Sustainability requires the condition of a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature (York & Becker, 2012). In this manner, Becker (2012) suggests that sustainability requires an approach to the self-identity to be called the sustainable person, who can be developed
through the relationship with nature and people in current and future generations. In this context, fostering a relationship with nature and people is one of the factors in developing the sustainable self. The sense of ecological identities must be nurtured through the social interactions, which facilitates individuals’ understanding of the ecological meanings of social behaviors to promote sustainability (Zavestoski, 2003).

Third, MacPherson (2011) states that curriculum for sustainable development needs to include several areas of educational inquiry such as intercultural learning including indigenous cultural knowledge. The inquiry should focus on the interaction between an ecologically oriented culture and postmodern culture (MacPherson, 2011). An alternative perspective on nature can be learned through the interactions of people living in a sustainable heritage. The voice of ancient wisdom can be heard to acknowledge alternatives to confront climate change (Davis, 2009). The heritage of indigenous wisdom derived from their traditional spirit living with nature can cultivate our own wisdom to make a right choice for a sustainable future. The learning process through the interactions and its application to our daily life of indigenous wisdom can realize the internal and external development of the self. The pedagogy should be practically implemented to raise collective well-being in society while fostering the connections between us and indigenous heritage, which shares the common mission to promote sustainability.

**Conclusion**

The promotion of sustainability entails our change and action as a fundamental cause of sustainability. Therefore, this paper suggests collective well-being as a way to realize an inner transformation and actions to promote sustainability within us and in reality. The author also iterates that the transformation occurs in forging the relationships with
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society and nature, which raise our moral capability to choose right actions for sustainability.

This paper attempted the comparative analysis of the unsustainable self and sustainable self, which clarifies the fundamental elements of the sustainable self with several conceptual attempts to attain the oneness of the self and nature. In the comparative and transformative analysis, the disconnection with nature and others divided by ego is one of the components of the unsustainable self. The separation can be united into oneness with an ethical approach in our altruistic actions with compassion and care. Furthermore, our ethical capacity is fostered through enhancing social and personal actions in the promotion of the collective well-being with the social relationship. Care and relationship are reciprocal; when we care for others, we can develop the relationships (Clayton & Myers, 2009). Social actions with care and compassion by the sustainable self promote the unity of needs between the self and others through collective self-realization.

The sustainable self is an individual equipped with moral wisdom to promote sustainability at a local level in the collective actions and to foster the self at present and the next generation who can succeed the mission of the sustainable self. The pedagogical approach to sustainability is suggested as a radical approach to bringing about an individual change from within as a primary cause for a sustainable future. Therefore, the mission of local society lies in the effort to support promoting the sustainable self with an educational methodology, which assists people to make a holistic and altruistic choice for sustainability and well-being. National governments and international organizations need to assist local schools and educators to implement the pedagogy for the sustainable self, which supports learners to enhance connections
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with nature and society. In this conceptual development and pedagogical implementation, the sustainable self can be fostered as an awakened individual with a strong sense of the noble mission to create a sustainable future. In the perspective of this paper, sustainability can be considered not only a challenge and struggle for all humanity but also an opportunity for flourishing their lives than ever in promoting collective well-being.

References


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