Bioetihcs and integral ecology: The role of universities in the care of the common house

Bioética y ecología integral: el papel de las universidades en el cuidado de la casa común

Martha Sofía Solís Jonapá*

Abstract

The main theme of this essay is, first, to describe how to define a university that is socially responsible, what its characteristics are and how the ecological factor is an important and indispensable element for it to be given this label. In the second part, we will examine in depth how the ecological factor must include the binomial «environmental ecology» and «social ecology», as described in the encyclical letter *Laudato si',* in order for it to be truly integral.

* Anahuac University Mexico. Email: sofia.solis@anahuac.mx
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8617-819

1. Introduction

This essay is a descriptive theoretical study of the socially responsible university, in which the socio-environmental factor is highlighted, and solutions are offered for universities to make a diagnosis of their degree of social and environmental responsibility.

The first part will begin by describing what a socially responsible university is and what characteristics it should have in order to be socially responsible. For this first part I will rely mainly on the theories of François Vallaeys.

In this description, we will realize that a very important factor that should not be missing in a socially responsible university is the care of the university's ecology, *ad-intra* and *ad-extra*. Then, in the second part, we will describe the process of responsibility and environmental care that should exist in socially responsible universities. Through a practical case, the Plan Vert –or *Green Plan*, which is a program of indicators of university social responsibility implemented in universities in France–, it will be developed how it is possible to incorporate public policies that help to make ecology part of the strategic plan of universities. Finally, the concept of «integral ecology» will be defined, a term coined by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato si'*, which implies an environmental ecology, but also a «human» or «social» ecology. It is thus demonstrated that without both concepts, it is not possible to speak of a complete and authentic integral ecology.

2. The socially responsible university

We will begin by defining what a socially responsible university is. In the words of François Valley*, we understand that assuming its commitment and social responsibility is, for a university, a permanent process of continuous improvement; the path towards a horizon that can never be fully*

reached. No university can proclaim itself socially responsible, but all of them can take responsibility for their social links and impacts... (1).

Social responsibility must color and benefit the entire university. One of its most important values is precisely institutional coherence, which means both coincidence between action and institutional discourse and consistency among all areas of the university (that is, there is no contradiction between what one area does and what another does) (1).
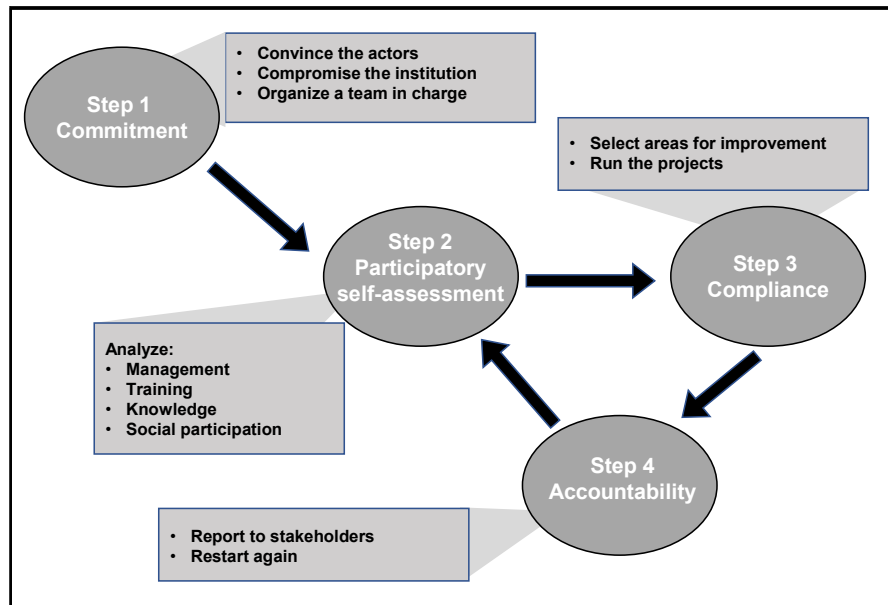
Therefore, the process of social responsibility reaches the four areas or spheres of the university:

- *Organizational sphere,* in that it is an institution that operates around a university project, with a structure that develops it and concrete policies that promote it. It is also an institution that consumes, hires, generates waste, and so on.
- *Educational sphere:* Since it is an institution that is responsible for the training of its students, with a professional and civic vocation.
- *Knowledge area:* Since it is an institution that researches, produces knowledge and transmits it.
- *Social sphere:* In that it is an institution that is part of society and interacts with other agents, collectives and communities, both locally and globally (1).

The process described by François Vallaeys in 2009 to make a university socially responsible is shown in Figure 1 on the next page.

As shown in Figure 1, in the first place it is vital that the stakeholders are committed to the process towards a socially responsible university and organize a team to carry it forward. Secondly, a diagnosis should be made of the state of the university with respect to social responsibility and some steps for analysis or improvement should be established. The third step will consist of implementation in the selected areas of improvement. Finally, step 4 refers to the report or report on the process carried out that is given to the stakeholders.

Figure 1. The four steps of social responsibility (Vallaeys, 2009).

- Convince the actors
- Compromise the institution
- Organize a team in charge

Step 1 Commitment

- Select areas for improvement
- Run the projects

Step 2 Participatory self-assessment

Step 3 Compliance

Analyze:
- Management
- Training
- Knowledge
- Social participation

Step 4 Accountability

- Report to stakeholders
- Restart again

Source: Vallaeys, de la Cruz and Sasia (2009).

Also positively, although without ruling out the negative, François Vallaeys (1) describes some attributes that define social responsibility in the *Manual of first steps for social responsibility in universities:*

a) Good governance. This means that the organization defines its mission and adheres to it, implements a code of ethics and an autonomous committee in charge of promoting it, ensures compliance with laws and the most stringent international standards (labor, social, environmental), ensures a good working environment, fights against discrimination and inequality, protects people's fundamental rights and is committed to accountability. The objective of these good governance practices is to avoid the risk of corruption in the organization.

b) Management of environmental and social impacts. The organization must be aware of the consequences and effects that its processes

and actions have on the human, social and environmental spheres. It must ensure that the normal operation of the organization does not generate negative impacts and, if it does, it must guarantee that they can be mitigated to bring them to legally and socially acceptable levels. Social responsibility is a management policy that obliges the organization to internalize its externalities. It thus tries to avoid the risk of autism of the organization.

This is the most important factor to take into account for the purposes of this essay and is sometimes neglected in our universities. The university must include in its strategic plans the management of the environmental and social impacts it generates.

a) Dialogue with and accountability to stakeholders. In an organization, the interests of many actors linked directly or indirectly to it are intertwined, actors who are affected by its performance and who in turn have the capacity to affect it. The organization must respond to its stakeholders and establish a transparent and democratic relationship with them. This process of socially responsible regulation seeks to avoid the risk of egocentrism of the organization.

b) Alliances to participate in sustainable development. The organization must be understood as part of a broad and complex social network, in which it can play an important intermediary role in bringing complementary interests closer together. Transcending the gaze of the institution itself to forge alliances increases the social capital of the environment and allows it to move from a reactive logic (of adaptation) to a proactive logic (of innovation), creating new solidarities for the solution of social and environmental problems. This avoids the risk of organizational selfishness (1).

The most practical way to define university social responsibility is to consider the impacts that the institution generates on its environment. Broadly speaking, these impacts can be grouped into four categories: organizational, educational, cognitive and social. These are shown in Figure 2 on the next page.

Therefore, a socially responsible university is one that is concerned not only with effective management and its content (curricu-

Figure 2. Four types of university impacts (Vallaeys, 2009).
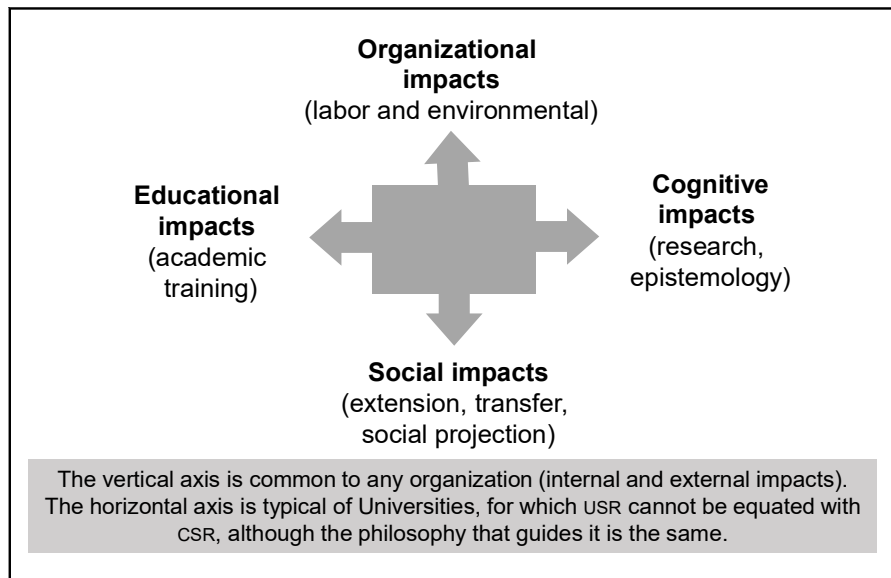
Source: Vallaeys, De la Cruz and Sasia (2009).

la), but also with the profile of the graduate with a focus on social responsibility, the research it generates and environmental care.

In addition, for USR to be effective and efficient, it must be transversal in all areas of the university. The actors of the university are a little different from those of any company are somewhat different from those of any company, namely: administrative staff, teachers, students, as well as its areas: research, extension and social impact projects, among others. All actors and areas of the university must be integrated into the process of social responsibility to ensure that this process permeates integrally.

Figure 3 shows the various areas of the university and how they are involved in the process of university social responsibility, through a network of actions that train, support, teach, promote, guide and organize the process, creating a true «social responsibility reform» at the university.

Over the years, research and development has been carried out on the processes, attributes and indicators of USR in universities in Latin America, achieving new models. In 2016, the Union of University Social Responsibility for Latin America (USRLA) was created.

Since 15 fifteen years ago, new models of university social commitment began to be built in Latin America and the Caribbean under the name of University Social Responsibility (USR). Several networks have sought and seek to promote this approach in the region: Universidad Construye País (University Builds Country) in Chile; the Network of Universities linked to the Inter-American Initiative on Ethics, Social Capital and Development of the IBD; the AUSJAL Network; the Latin American Network of University Cooperation; the Ibero-American Network of University Volunteers (REDIVU)... Observatories dedicated to the subject have also been created: OI-

Figure 3. The RSU reform in the university (Vallaeys, 2009).
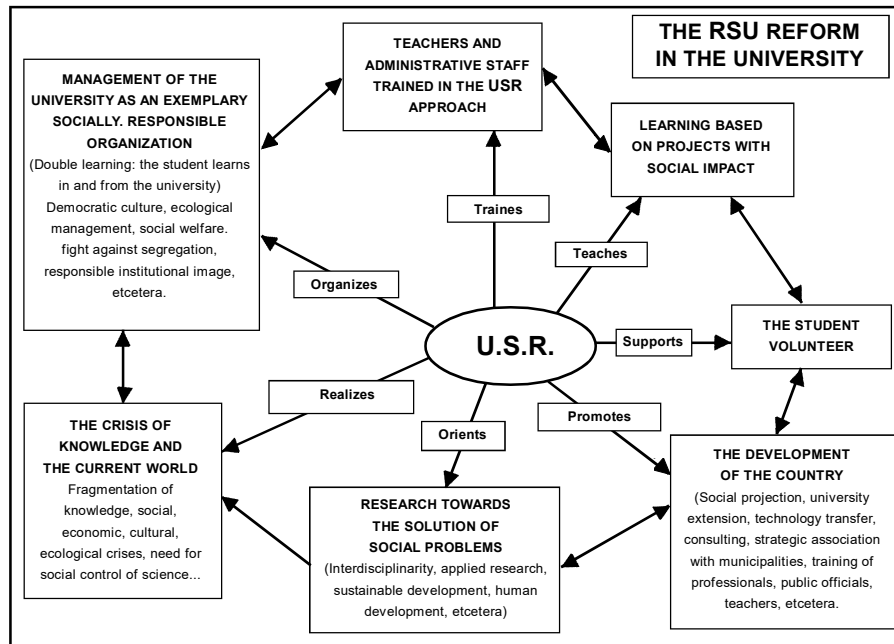
Source: Source: Valles (2006), Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.

RSUD, ORSU, ORSALC, OMERSU... This boom echoes many international initiatives such as the Talloires Network or the Manifesto of the European Movement EUUSR (University Social Responsibility in Europe). In the last decade, many universities have rebranded their areas of social engagement in terms of USR and countless academic events, publications and research have been devoted to the topic.

The most recent model on university social responsibility in Latin America is the one proposed in 2019 by François Vallaeys, David Solano and Marcos Oliveira through URSULA. The areas they propose are the same as those proposed by Vallaeys in 2009, with some variations in the names of the variables, but similar in essence, namely: 1) organizational management, 2) training, 3) cognition, and 4) social participation. Each of these areas of action is expressed in the achievement of three socially responsible performance goals. The 12 USR goals respond to the fulfillment of 66 indicators in total. These 12 goals allow synthesizing the efforts to promote a transversal management of USR in HEIs, channeling research without constraining the autonomy of the participating institutions. They are a selection of desirable measures of socially responsible management of HEIs, chosen based on the theory and practice of USR in Latin America, so that they can be a source of encouragement and continuous improvement for the participants, their authorities, teachers, administrators and students. The following is the most recent model on USR based on the experience and contributions of some universities in Latin America (2).

After ascertaining what a socially responsible university is, questions arise as to what aspects it covers, which actors are involved in the process and how they interact with each other; how the process is institutionalized in the university that is starting the social responsibility process.

It is institutionalized as a strategy for continuous improvement through three questions:

Figure 4. Social Responsibility Model (URSULA 2019).
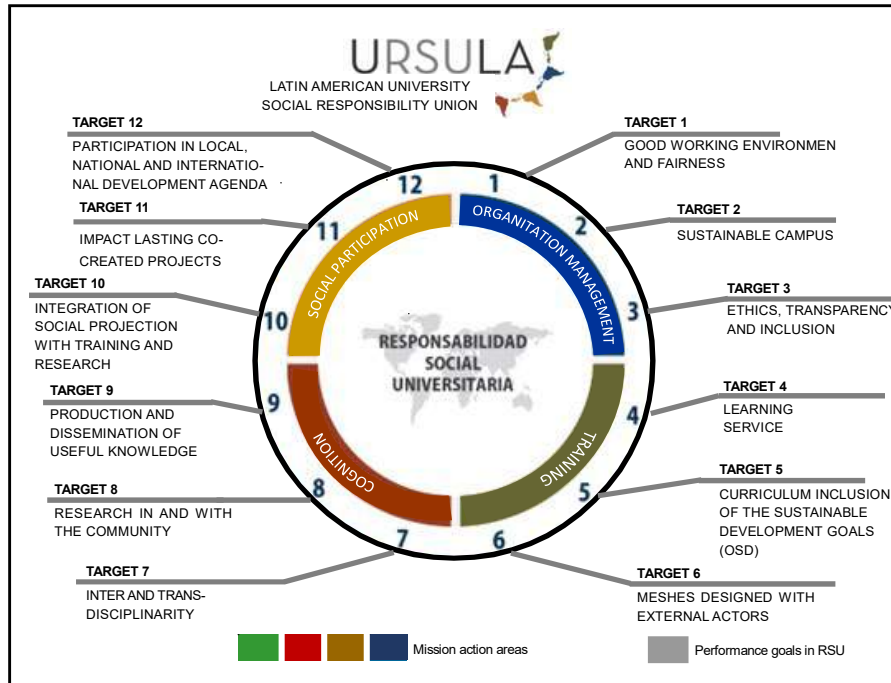
a) What are our negative impacts? (Participatory institutional self-diagnosis).

b) What should we do to eliminate them? (Continuous improvement planning among all members of the university community).

c) With whom should we partner to achieve this? (Constitution of inter-organizational networks of social co-responsibility).

Every institution that wants to be socially responsible should ask itself these three questions as a minimum requirement to begin a serious process of reflection on this subject (3). Knowing that there are unions that reflect and carry out research on the subject of responsibility, such as USRULA, is a way to carry out a systematic

reflection and begin to take steps towards university social responsibility.

As can be seen, after describing social responsibility in universities, it is incomplete without the element of environmental care. A university that qualifies itself as «socially responsible» and does not take into account the socio-environmental factor is not really being socially responsible. I will devote the second part of this essay to this aspect.

3. Ecology, an important and indispensable factor in university social responsibility

On the threshold of the third millennium, with a scientific and technological revolution capable of promoting social and economic development of great dimensions, environmental deterioration expresses the crisis of a model of civilization and a style of development that have been characterized by man's dominion over nature, irrational exploitation of resources and critical poverty. As Edgar González Gaudiano (1993a, p. 18) rightly points out, based on the proposals of the Commission on Development and Environment in Latin America and the Caribbean, poverty is both cause and effect of environmental deterioration in Latin America (4).

Hence, for the environmental perspective, the challenges of contemporary society revolve around *the conflict between development and environmental preservation and between the idea of progress and environmental determinism* (5).

This scenario places the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean at a historical crossroads, since the globalization process demands active participation in the world market, which implies the creation of a scientific and technological system linked to the productive system to increase productivity. However, it also has as a priority the rational management of its natural capital and environment, since the region has already entered *a stage in which the indiscri-*

minate and abusive exploitation of existing resources would mean a brake on development and, in addition, would make its effects felt in a not very long period of time (ECLAC, 1991, p. 201).

Faced with this problem of socio-environmental emergency, the environmentalist tendency arises so that education is assigned a primordial function in its policy, and strives to develop environmental education at the formal and informal levels to train citizens whose participation in environmental conservation is based on the knowledge of environmental problems and on a critical and responsible awareness.

Environmental education should be understood as a process oriented towards development, without deteriorating the environment that sustains ecological dynamics and, therefore, ensuring an equitable distribution in the present and availability of resources for future generations (González, 1993b, p. 215-216). Another definition of environmental education is given by Martínez Roger, of the National University of Costa Rica: *Environmental education is the educational process that deals with the relationship of human beings with their environment (natural and artificial) and with themselves, as well as the consequences of this relationship. In this way, environmental education must constitute an integral process, which plays its role in the whole framework of teaching and learning. For this, it is necessary to establish an educational process that questions the relationship of any subject or activity of the human being, within an analysis of the importance or incidence in social and environmental life, as is the pedagogical part and its political essence.*

Linking universities to these needs through environmental development programs focused on achieving quality of life places these institutions in a privileged place in the social context, a place from which they can contribute not only to the reproduction of society, but also to promote a new relationship between man and nature and between men and women, and propose different lifestyles (4).

An example of how the university can generate environmental education and development programs that are effective, large-scale and that achieve a deep and lasting impact is the Plan Vert –or *Green*

Plan, which is a program of university social responsibility indicators– that has been developed in universities in France. Through public policies, a national program has been developed for universities to imbue their realities by taking into account the environmental factor.

The Grenelle 1 Law on the environment of August 3, 2009, requires all French higher education institutions to promote sustainable development in its economic, social and environmental dimensions, under the name *Green Plan*.

Since June 17, 2010, a referential *Green Plan* is being promoted by the Conference of the Presidents of Universities (CPU), associated with the Conference of the Grandes Ecoles (CGE), integrating the nine challenges of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2010-2013 «towards a green and equitable economy» of the Ministry of Sustainable Development. These nine challenges are: sustainable consumption and production; knowledge society; good governance; climate change and energy; sustainable transport and mobility; sustainable conservation and management of biodiversity and natural resources; public health, risk prevention and management; demography, immigration and social inclusion; international challenges in terms of human rights and the fight against poverty in the world (Vallaeys, Presentation of the Plan Vert for Universities in France) (6).

The *Green Plan* is an institutional piloting tool with the following properties:
  – A pedagogical tool for sustainable development and SR;
  – A tool for communication and dissemination of good practices;
  – A strategic guide (continuous improvement over 1, 3 and 5 years, prioritization of actions to be taken) in line with the French law and the ISO26000 standard;
  – A self-diagnosis tool (strengths, weaknesses, actions taken);
  – A process monitoring and evaluation table for the operational management and sustainable development promoters of each facility, and
  – A basis for the certification process.

This ensures that concrete environmental care actions are implemented at the general and national level in the universities. It is an excellent example of how these policies and practices can be implemented in Latin American universities.

On the other hand, the concept of ecology cannot be separated from the social factor. Integral ecology must be taken into account as a conceptual paradigm.

From a conceptual point of view, Pope Francis assumes the term «ecology», not in the generic and often superficial meaning of some «green» concern, but in the much deeper meaning of the approach to all complex systems, the understanding of which requires putting into practice in the foreground the relationship of the individual parts among themselves and with the whole. The reference is to the ecosystem image (7). A university that does not take into account integral ecology as a whole, with a holistic vision, is not really being fully ecological. This includes the environmental factor on the one hand and the social factor on the other.

Attention to ties and relationships allows the use of integral ecology also to read the relationship with one's own body (No. 155), or the social and institutional dynamics at all levels: *If everything is in relationship, even the state of health of the institutions of a society has consequences for the environment and for the quality of human life* (No. 142). Therefore, we can speak of a social dimension of ecology, or rather of *a true social ecology [which] is necessarily institutional and progressively reaches the different dimensions ranging from the primary social group, the family, to international life, passing through the local community and the nation* (ibid).

It is important, therefore, that the universities take into account the social ecological factor, starting with the care of teachers, students and administrative staff, with good practices that take care of them, also helping the most disadvantaged. And then it goes through the curricula, research, extension and social projects aimed at favoring society and the environment, where the university is immersed.

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* has the following structure:

The text begins (Chapter 1: *What is happening to our house*) with the moment of *seeing*, in which the problematic that will guide the discursive development is posed; then moves to a stage that, from the Catholic tradition, is called *illuminating* (Chapter 2: *The Gospel of creation*), in which reference is made to biblical texts that provide a religious foundation around the theme that is developed; follows the stage of *judging* (Chapter 3: *The human root of the ecological crisis*) which, after the discussion, is directed towards a theoretical proposal (Chapter 4: *Integral ecology*) and a methodological proposal (Chapter 5: *Some lines of orientation and action)*, to finally pass to the stage of *acting* (Chapter 6*: Ecological education and spirituality*), in which concrete actions are proposed to the addressees of the text (8).

In Chapter 6, after a profound reflection, the document moves on to *acting*, and offers some very practical means that can be lived from the personal level, applicable also to the university environment.

Integrating and fully understanding the scope of even the smallest daily actions of attention to the environment that Pope Francis proposes: *avoiding the use of plastic or paper, reducing water consumption, differentiating waste, cooking only what is reasonably possible, treating other living beings with care, using public transportation or sharing the same vehicle among several people, planting trees, turning off useless lights, etc.* (n. 211). When they are deeply motivated, these gestures are not «ascetic green duties» but acts of love that express our dignity (7).

Five years ago, the Pontiff noted that the operative verb in the man-environment relationship is to guard: we are guardians of the Earth. We are accountable to the Creator for our actions with regard to the natural resources at our disposal. Catholics accept the principle of the common destiny of creation, from which the consideration of our Planet as a «common home» is derived. If we are to care for the material environment, must we not care even more for our neighbor? (9).

Therefore, starting with small actions at the personal and university level, with clear and institutional policies, we can begin with small changes that in the long run will be beneficial for our Planet and for the future of new generations. Assuming the university's social responsibility to train, teach and support the process of integral ecological care should be an objective included in the University's strategic plan.

4. Conclusions

In this discursive reflection we have seen how university social responsibility has its own elements that must be diagnosed in universities and worked with concrete actions. An important part of USR is the care of the environment; this is an imperative to take care of creation and our Planet, which is not renewable and has a finite life span. Much can be done from the universities, starting by having clear policies on ecological care. Ecology, in order to be integral, although it must contain the environmental factor and care for the environment, must not forget the social and human factor that includes care for the poorest and most marginalized. Only in this way will we be implementing university social responsibility programs that are truly integral.

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