



## **One World, Democracy and Sustainable Development**

**Halina Ward**

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### **Sustainable development**

I want to address the idea of One World – the core theme for this weekend’s discussions – by considering links between democracy and sustainable development.

Sustainable development is in essence about taking an integrated approach to decision-making across three main areas of concern: economy, environment and society.

The definition of sustainable development that is most commonly quoted is taken from the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which defined sustainable development as “*development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”.

It is clear today that we are doing neither: we are palpably failing to tackle poverty and inequality on the scales necessary to ensure that we are able to meet the needs of the present generation. And we are clearly compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs as collectively we deplete resources, grow the world’s population to levels that threaten our ability to feed ourselves, and alter the climate in ways that could prove profoundly harmful if not catastrophic.

### **One world thinking and sustainable development**

In his book *One World*, Peter Singer focuses on the ethical dimensions of globalisation. In essence, his argument is that how well we come through the globalisation process will depend on how we respond to the idea of living in one world.

The challenge of achieving sustainable development highlights the essence of globalisation as ‘interconnectedness’. The impacts of carbon emissions and environmental pollution do not stop at the borders of nation states; and we know that overconsumption in the world’s richest countries makes life more difficult for others elsewhere by quickening depletion of resources.

It is almost a truism that our systems of governance – be they democratic or otherwise – have not caught up with the reality of this interconnected world. Our ethical sensibilities have to some extent been shaped by sustainable development – even if we don’t call it that – but the weddedness of governments to economic growth has meant that we sometimes struggle to articulate our ethical concerns as citizens; expressing ourselves instead primarily as consumers.



What, then, are the sources of our current unsustainable development? Why is it that, bizarrely, we are on a collision course with our own planet? Drawing on ideas in a paper from IIED's Steve Bass,<sup>1</sup> I'd like to highlight four main problems.

### ***Economic growth***

The first problem lies with the addiction to economic growth as if it were an end in itself, not a means to an end.

Let me give some examples: all of them happen to be drawn from the US, but many others could be drawn from many other countries.

In March 2009, Gallup reported that "*For the first time in Gallup's 25-year history of asking Americans about the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth, a majority of Americans say economic growth should be given the priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent*".<sup>2</sup> The majority itself was slim – but even so, 51% prioritised economic growth in 2009 compared to 42% the year previously. At a time of near-global recession the shift was symbolically significant, underscoring the challenge of pursuing sustainable development in a recession.

In 1992 – when Americans talking to Gallup were already prioritising environmental protection over economic growth – then-US President George Bush Senior was famously reported to have said to journalists, whilst at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the "Earth Summit", that "*the American way of life is not up for negotiation*".<sup>3</sup>

The presumed quote from President Bush shows multi-world world thinking *par extraordinaire*. If the World Wide Fund for Nature has done its calculations right and if everyone adopted the average American way of life we would need not one world, but five, by 2050 to meet demands for food, water, shelter and in order to absorb the wastes that would result.

Multi-world thinking. But we only have one world, not five.

Sadly, the response to the world's ongoing economic and financial woes has been a great rush to facilitate the continuation of largely the same system that currently makes sustainable development impossible. And if the US Gallup poll is right, it seems that this is what many American people themselves wish to see prioritised at this moment in time.

It is not surprising then that Under President Obama, in June 2009, US special climate envoy Todd Stern was reported as saying that "*The 40 percent [cut in carbon emissions] below 1990 (levels) is something which in our judgment is not necessary, and not feasible given where we're starting from, so it's not on the cards*".<sup>4</sup>

### ***Marginalisation and inequality***

Marginalisation of poor people and entrenched inequalities are a second source of unsustainable development. In the UK, one of the world's most unequal rich countries, the potential for inequality to drive wider social malaise has received considerable attention with



the publication of *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better*. This book uses statistics on income inequality and social and health problems to argue that only greater equality – not wealth, but equality – will allow us to improve levels of human wellbeing and address environmental problems effectively.<sup>5</sup>

### **Prices**

The prices that we pay for goods and services do not take the full environmental and social costs of production and consumption into account: instead, the costs represented by negative environmental and social costs are ‘externalised’.

### **Political systems**

The *tools* of one-world thinking for sustainable development are well developed: for example environmental and social impact assessment, full-cost accounting, and the idea of environmental footprints are among them. Yet the take-up of such tools is hampered by the fourth great scourge of unsustainable development: a failure of political systems and institutions to deliver. ‘One world’ thinking has a strong political as well as an ethical dimension.

A closely related problem is that the evolution of democracy has been so closely coupled to economic growth that decoupling, whilst much needed, is difficult. And this is as much a challenge for those international agencies that work to ‘export’ democracy through international assistance programmes as it is for national level governments.

The implicit formulation of sustainable development as a challenge of democracy finds resonance in one of the outcomes of the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development. In extraordinary language for an intergovernmental accord, the 2002 Johannesburg Declaration asserts that:

*“.. unless we act in a manner that fundamentally changes their lives the poor of the world may lose confidence in their representatives and the democratic systems to which we remain committed, seeing their representatives as nothing more than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals”*.<sup>6</sup>

There is something potentially profoundly enabling in the idea that sustainable development challenges such as climate change might not fundamentally be failures of markets, but rather failures of democracy.<sup>7</sup>

If we are to deliver a one-world perspective on sustainable development, we need to step from the ethical into the political realm; to equip democracy itself to deliver sustainable development. In other words, a significant part of our ability to cope with the sustainable development challenges of the twenty-first century must lie not only with ethical innovation at local level, but with evolution in systems of democratic decision-making at the local, national and global levels.

According to the ranking of US-based Freedom House, as at mid-2007, only 46% of the world’s population lived in a country classed as ‘free’ (for these purposes the Freedom House category ‘free’ can be viewed as a very rough proxy for ‘democracy’).<sup>8</sup> And yet,



despite the fact that democracy is a political system that has not yet reached even a majority of the world's population, we have no option but to seek to strengthen democracy for sustainable development.

Democracy is the only political system that is able deliver respect for human rights on the scale that is necessary, ethically, to maintain the dignity of humankind. Indeed, the central idea of democracy – governance of the people by the people – is built into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says, in Article 21(3), that:

*“The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures”.*

### **Sustainable development challenges democracy**

There are a number of distinctive ways in which sustainable development presents challenges for democracy.

To mention briefly just three: a first challenge is that of long-term thinking for genuinely sustainable development in the face of short-term crises and election cycles. This in turn can be linked to more general symptoms of malaise in democracy within many European countries, exemplified by voter apathy, lack of trust in politicians, and the real-world obstacles to achieving genuinely inclusive participation in almost any setting. The ‘corporate social responsibility’ movement invites businesses to adopt long-term thinking as the basis for their ‘business case’ for sustainable development, but it is hard to get elected representatives to do the same thing.

A second major challenge concerns unrepresented interests: particularly the interests of those without voting rights (including nature itself, children and future generations), and those without an effective voice, including the most marginalised people in society.

Here, there is a great deal of existing innovation to draw from in framing proposals on concrete ways in which to strengthen the ability of democracies to take account of unrepresented interests. For example, experiments are beginning to take root in different parts of the world on institutional innovations that can help to integrate concern for future generations, or the environment, into parliamentary decision-making. The Israeli Knesset's Commission for Future Generations, or Hungary's newly-established green ombudsman are just two examples.

A third challenge concerns the difficulty of making legitimate and accountable choices on trade-offs when it is difficult to see ‘win-win-win’ solutions that work at once for economy, environment and society. A decision on use of natural resources that has potential to promote sustainable development at national level – for example in the case of wind power – may adversely affect the rights of community members closest to the ground. Yet sustainable development demands integrated thinking and action on economy, society and environment.

Ideas about ‘nested governance’ or ‘network governance’ can inform evolving thinking and practice on how best democratically to make decisions about the levels at which sustainable



development should be pursued, from the local to the global. But there is still surprisingly little shared understanding on how best to combine and integrate different levels of democratic decision-making for sustainable development.

Local level innovation has to lie at the heart of efforts to equip democracy for sustainable development. In the UK we have seen a major rise of interest in community-based solutions to issues including climate change and sustainable energy generation; but there is still a great deal of work to be done to ensure that bottom-up, local solutions work in support of one-world thinking; to ensure that local level innovation does not inadvertently put up new barriers between people and communities or even promote negative forms of environmental nationalism.

As citizens, we need to engage more and more often in public spaces in support of sustainable development. We too, not only politicians, have a responsibility to help to strengthen the legitimacy of decisions properly taken by our elected representatives. Getting real leadership from our elected representatives when really tough choices about sustainable development are needed requires us to engage more, not less.

The answers to the difficulties of achieving sustainable development lie in part with evolution in democratic practice. And the practice of democracy needs to become thoroughly infected with one world ethics if sustainable development is to result.

*Halina Ward is Director of the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development; the new name for The Environment Foundation*

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Bass, *A New Era in Sustainable Development*, IIED 2007, available online at <http://www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=11071IIED&n=4&l=43&a=S%20Bass>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116962/Americans-Economy-Takes-Precedence-Environment.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.mail-archive.com/gep-ed@listserve1.allegheny.edu/msg01669.html> for an email discussion on when exactly he said this, raising the possibility that the quote may be a potent urban myth

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hsS\\_SXGavBiqXFfOIViSFDLk9QlgD990N6G01](http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hsS_SXGavBiqXFfOIViSFDLk9QlgD990N6G01)

<sup>5</sup> See further [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk)

<sup>6</sup> Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, 4 September 2002. See [http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD\\_POI\\_PD/English/POI\\_PD.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/POI_PD.htm)

<sup>7</sup> See further Sara Parkin's piece on [www.environmentfoundation.org.uk](http://www.environmentfoundation.org.uk)

<sup>8</sup> An even more pessimistic perspective is provided by *The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy 2008*, which concludes as at September 2008, applying a different methodology to that of Freedom House, that "Half of the world's population lives in a democracy of some sort, although only some 14% reside in full democracies".