

Democracy, Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development

Issues and approaches for civil society in the UK: an emerging agenda

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Foreword

This note builds on an exchange of ideas at a half-day meeting on ‘democracy, environmental justice and sustainable development’ which took place on 26th October 2009.

The aim was to provide an opportunity for a small group of peers from a range of non-governmental organisations in the UK to:

- share relevant insights from their work to strengthen democracy, enhance public engagement, or deliver environmental justice and sustainable development (stepping outside established organisational or sectoral boundaries where possible);
- identify some of the most important questions, given our different perspectives, at the heart of the democracy/environmental justice/sustainable development nexus, and
- begin a conversation about the potential for collaboration going forward.

In our limited time together, we were able only to begin to address each of these issues. Some gaps in our conversation will need further attention: for example, we were not able to explore in any detail issues arising out of the ‘fit’ between different tiers of government – either in terms of the impact of the devolution agenda for environmental justice and sustainable development, or in terms of the impact of the EU or levels of government ‘above’ the national.

We agreed to meet again in late January or early February, with a view both to clarifying some of the core issues and terms at the heart of our shared concerns, and to identify scope for shared action going forward. For reasons of continuity, that second meeting should not involve very many more people than our first– but it should set a basis for going out to a wider group of people with some clear ideas on activities and common concerns to be pursued.

Key issues and concerns

We share an interest both in democracy and in substantive social and environmental outcomes. As individuals and as organisations, we work in a range of ways. Our organisations take a variety of forms. Some are charities, others are social enterprises, public bodies, or funded project initiatives.

Environmental justice and sustainable development depend closely on the quality of democratic decision-making. And it is much more likely that environmental justice and sustainable development will be achieved if conscious effort is put into equipping the UK's systems of democratic decision-making for these goals.

There is real value in understanding the coming generation of environmental and therefore social issues in terms of the challenges that they will pose to democracy. Most of us have already expressed a strong organisational commitment to addressing environmental issues such as climate change in terms of their implications for social justice. But some gaps remain if the links to democracy are to be fully made.

It might be superficially tempting to seek to short-cut democracy in the quest for environmental justice and sustainable development. Perhaps a benign dictator might be better placed to serve the interests of poorer or marginalised people? In contrast, in an unequal society a self-serving majoritarian electorate might be concerned principally only to draw a greater share of existing resources to themselves and their friends. This is an important point; but given the broader case for democracy on both ethical and human rights grounds, it serves principally to underscore the importance of efforts to ensure that democracy, not dictatorship, is equipped and capable of delivering environmental justice and sustainable development.

The contemporary challenges of shaping global climate policy and its associated actions at national level are now leading political leaders in the UK to state that they feel hampered by the lack of a supporting mass movement for progressive action. Recent opinion polls and analysis from the UK now highlight 'climate fatigue' (as for example in IPPR's September 2009 report, *Consumer Power: How the Public thinks lower-carbon behaviour could be made mainstream*), or a majority-held view that other countries and their citizens (China in particular), should take the lead (as expressed in a poll reported in the *Financial Times* on 19th October 2009). Democracy as it currently operates in the UK, in this case, has almost been held up as hampering the progressive will of government.

There are other models though. The WorldWideViews Climate Change Dialogue, for example (see further <http://worldwideviewsuk.org.uk/>), demonstrates that engaging people in a different, much more proactive and deliberative way than is usual can lead to very different outcomes.

There is real value in understanding the coming generation of environmental and therefore inherently social issues in terms of the challenges that they will pose to democracy. Most of us have already expressed a strong organisational commitment to addressing environmental challenges such as climate change or a new 'green transition' in terms of their implications for social justice. But some gaps remain if the links to democracy are to be fully made.

This is territory where both Left and Right struggle. Both have difficulty, particularly, with the idea of 'living within limits'. The result is a lack of engagement or real debate on alternatives to our current

failure to live within limits – because those stories that already exist simply do not fit mainstream Party agendas.

A further problem is that there is no coherent ‘non-governmental organisation’ or ‘third sector’ understanding of how to join an understanding of democracy – and the distinctive role of the ‘third sector’ within it – to the pursuit of social outcomes including environmental justice and sustainable development.

The term ‘third sector’ currently has some political traction, yet it is a term that is not commonly understood. Indeed, it can sometimes be unhelpful in progressing understanding of the role of non-governmental organisations in achieving the best possible connections between democracy, environmental justice and sustainable development.

Any reflection on how non-governmental organisations contribute to strengthening democracy for environmental justice and sustainable development must start with an understanding of where NGOs stand at the moment: memory, in short, is important in stimulating innovative thinking. This cannot be a utopian exercise.

There is a perception on the part of government that the ‘third sector’ is particularly adept at working with communities. But in reality some organisations probably lost their connection to communities and community groups some time ago. Others might have community reach, but without the resources to pursue it. In other cases such as ‘member led’ organisations the ability of the organisation to ‘lead’ or influence its members may be limited.

There are some particular problems with how a ‘tri-partite’ vision of the state, the market, and the ‘third sector’ relates to community groups. First is a tendency for government and public bodies in the UK to ‘marketise’ community-based groups; seeing them principally as potential service delivery agents based on a market model, rather than as people coming together from a desire to change the world in different ways. The description of much of civil society as a ‘sector’ carries with it the ‘marketisation’ of the essential idea that civil society, particularly community-based groups, is independent of either the state or the market.

A second problem in the UK is that there is a tendency for government and public bodies only really to see those organisations that are equipped and comfortable engaging with local authorities. Of some 870,000 community groups in the UK, some 600,000 work informally as associations of concerned individuals, without formally registering as charities or other kinds of legal entities. The work of these groups can often go unrecognised, and they may find it difficult to manoeuvre within a Third Sector infrastructure that is often aimed at formal and/or larger organisations. In this sense, there is an inequality in the way in which the sector is viewed by government.

The strength of the community sector lies with its grass-roots energy, not with its ability to deliver services in line with contractual commitments: on time, and on budget. In an environment where the community sector is viewed as a service delivery agent, there is less emphasis on bringing people together in common cause at community level than on service delivery outcomes. And this runs the risk of missing the essential point that state and market emerge from civil society, not the other way round; that communities are full of people who can fill a hall on a locally important issue in ways

that councillors can only dream of; and that community organisations have also been a source of innovation, incubating ideas and ensuring continual democratic refreshment. And all of these roles are pursued somewhere in the space between the crosses on ballot boxes when it comes to elections.

There are few positive models to look to of democracies coping well with deep crisis of the kind that could result from challenges such as climate change and resource scarcity. In British political history, when really difficult issues have faced our democracy – as during two World Wars – elections have been suspended and coalition governments have been formed. Democracy has prospered within a system where it was possible to offer people more. Even whilst resources were cheap, not everyone shared equally. Yet as a society we have never reached a point where we were able to say: “we have enough now”.

Democracy must not be taken for granted. Yet at the same time, we should be prepared to learn from countries that are not democracies. Among the figures presented in the book *The Spirit Level* is one which presents countries according to their performance both in terms of ecological footprint per capita and progress against the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Only one country – Cuba – operates within world biocapacity per person while also surpassing the threshold for ‘high human development’. Yet Cuba is not a democracy, and there is often reluctance on the part of policy-makers and politicians to learn from the country’s experience.

There is also a pressing need to reflect critically on the wider implications of the current decentralisation and community involvement agendas.

The Conservative Party, Labour and the Liberal Democrats all show signs of having embraced the idea that there are real benefits in community engagement. Devolution is also an agenda for the three main parties. And yet, devolution, decentralisation and localism pushed down from above carry real risks. For example, without leadership from national government, decentralisation may simply result in devolution of power to communities whose citizens want to stop development in support of renewable energy goals.

Additionally, all the evidence suggests that the distribution of environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ is heavily influenced by the advocacy capacity of communities on the ground. One powerful insight from the environmental justice movement is the evidence of environmental ‘bads’ – a polluting factory, for example – being closely mapped onto areas of low income, high unemployment or marginalised communities. Issues like spatial equity and environmental justice can often call for solutions which a) mean redistribution of environmental risks (including hazardous installations) or indeed reparation for damage or potential damage as well as b) the possibility of providing incentives or economic benefits to communities to accept ‘environmental bads’.

Endorsement of the decentralisation and community involvement agendas, as currently conceived by central government and political parties, needs to be carefully considered. Decentralisation and localisation carry the risk that they may simply add vigour to the loudest voices at community level. The ‘community empowerment’ agenda has also proved both an opportunity and a threat. Devolution has resulted in some enhancement in the role of town halls but that has not necessarily been accompanied by real empowerment at local level.

On occasion, participatory democracy without leadership from above can generate highly problematic outcomes. For example, had the principle of London's congestion charge been put out to consultation, it might never have been implemented. Although the measure had originally been proposed by environmental NGOs, going ahead nonetheless was a brave act of political leadership on the part of Mayor Ken Livingstone. In contrast, a proposal to introduce congestion charging in Manchester was rejected in a referendum held in December 2008. Here, a major 'grassroots' campaign emerged against the proposed congestion charge, supported by Peel Holdings, a major North West property developer which owns the Trafford Centre (see further <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/sep/17/localgovernment.congestioncharging>).

Piecemeal engagement with communities also hampers efforts to pursue beneficial outcomes. Engaging communities in piecemeal fashion is almost certain to generate problematic outcomes because it impedes efforts by community members carefully to weigh up and balance costs and benefits. With more time and an engagement on a vision for a future of London it might be possible to generate a far more radical set of actions in favour of sustainable development than the Congestion Charge. But that would require not only leadership but also a concerted effort to involve many different stakeholders over a long period.

Dominant forms of economic development and politics are failing to deliver democracy that works for environmental justice and sustainable development. Bringing them into alignment calls for transformation. And transformation will entail nothing short of revolutionary change. Yet revolutionary goals cannot be achieved without power; and here the power of non-governmental organisations of all kinds is a key consideration.

NGOs talk a great deal about connecting with people – whether as consumers, or as citizens, or in other ways. But the language that most NGOs use is not one that makes for easy communication and engagement. A notable exception is the approach to interpretation at the Eden Project, which seeks to engage the widest possible audience, particularly those who often feel that the 'sustainable development' or 'environmental' agendas have little relevance for them.

NGOs have a tendency to think they have less power than they actually do (assuming more than exists) and often pay insufficient attention to how they communicate their goals and messages. Much of the time, NGOs are in a tripartite conversation with government, the media, and themselves; not with the people with whom they really set out to connect. They fail to engage with community concerns that are outside their specific campaign arena even if those concerns fall within their wider remit or mission. Too often, NGOs wind up campaigns at the point when they achieve, for example, a legal change. In so doing, they may fail to build, or shift a gear, to become a movement for more fundamental change.

So-called 'hard to reach' and vulnerable communities that are *de facto* excluded from certain democratic processes often have a quite different language and take on democratic issues or issues such as climate change. At the same time, the idea that there are people who are simply not interested in the environment needs to be deeply challenged. One of the reasons why the myth has not been dispelled by mainstream NGO's is because doing so is likely to draw attention to the way in which the environment sector itself fails to reflect the cultural diversity and demographics of the UK.

Paradoxically, reasonable attempts to build broad-based alliances between UK NGOs working on 'separate' themes by demonstrating the fundamental links between the destructive problems of individual agendas (such as the environment, or peace, or democracy, or rights, or development) and their practical policy and other solutions have all too often failed.

Building such alliances is made all the more urgent by the current narrow discourse in which the impacts of climate change are measured more in terms of impacts on sea levels, ice caps and rainforests rather than impacts on vulnerable, disadvantaged and poor people. The 'environmental' agenda and the 'people and social justice' agendas need to come together – for in reality they have never been apart.

Ideas on future collaboration

Going forward, our conversation focused in part on our roles as non-governmental organisations and (in one case) a public body. We reflected on how to strengthen delivery of environmental justice and sustainable development outcomes through our work. And we touched on the particular strengths and weaknesses of non-governmental NGOs within the democratic process.

Whether this angle – the strengths and weaknesses of NGOs – is one that we want to prioritise going forward is something for further discussion when we next meet. But an understanding of theories of social change is indispensable to building understanding on how better to equip democracy to deliver environmental justice and sustainable development.

Whatever the focus of our work going forward, it will be helpful for all of us to highlight positive examples of people coming together to make a difference. To use a fashionable term: what examples are going to provide 'the nudge' (borrowing from 'nudge economics') that could unleash solutions to the bigger questions?

What, then, are the sources of inspiration that we could draw on already? The 'Make Poverty History' campaign ultimately fell short of its promise. But one relevant NGO-based approach with real potential is the Third Sector Climate Change Declaration (<http://www.everyactioncounts.org.uk/declaration/declaration.htm>); a call to action on climate change by the sector itself for community groups, social enterprises and large NGOs to make a public commitment and plan of action to tackle climate change and environmental justice.

Another exciting ongoing development is the burgeoning interest in the 10:10 initiative, which, originating in a broadsheet newspaper campaign, has seen astounding levels of take-up from large organisations, local authorities; even central government itself. There are other examples too – from the UK and elsewhere – of transformative action that could inspire wider action. In Germany, for example, the city of Freiburg has developed a reputation as Germany's 'ecological capital' (see http://www.solarregion.freiburg.de/solarregion/freiburg_solar_city.php), achieving impressive take-up of solar energy alongside inspiring energy conservation initiatives and outcomes.

Box: 10:10: a mass movement on climate change that could shape democracy?

10:10 (www.1010uk.org) is a mass movement that is signing up people and organisations from every corner of British life. From councils and hospitals to faith groups and scout troops, organisations across the country are making commitments to take steps towards a low-carbon society.

Signing on to 10:10 involves making a commitment to reduce individual or organisational carbon emissions by 10% by the year 2010. Taking a lead from the movement, organisations to sign on include local authorities (such as Stockport and Manchester City Councils), public sector agencies (such as a range of NHS trusts), community groups, businesses, individuals and think-tanks. On 21st October 2009, a House of Commons debate took place on whether the government should sign up to 10:10.

Box: The Third Sector Climate Change Declaration

In 2006, the Every Action Counts programme launched The Third Sector Declaration on Climate Change. Programme partners - a consortium of leading voluntary and community sector umbrella organisations - developed the Declaration as a statement of intent and a tool to demonstrate leadership and promote action on the issue of climate change.

The Declaration seeks to link the issues of social, economic and environmental justice. We must tackle these together if we are to build sustainable communities that can avert catastrophic climate change, adapt to the impacts already locked into the system and ensure a just transition to the low carbon economy to which the Climate Change Act commits us.

The Declaration commits its signatories not just to action, but to accountability, advocacy, leadership and being part of a wider movement that aims to make a positive difference in our responses to climate change – no matter what the core mission and vision of our organisations.

The significance of initiatives and campaigns like 10:10 and the Third Sector Climate Change Declaration from a 'democracy, environmental justice and sustainable development' perspective lies with their potential to shape the democratic process itself; the ways in which democratic processes work for sustainable development; and the shifting balance in the roles of different actors,

particularly 'leaders' (in the case of 10:10 a newspaper, The Guardian, initially) and 'followers' (in the case of 10:10 a wide variety of other actors, including government itself). Other countries within the European Union have a different mix between the roles respectively of the citizen, political parties and the market.

Collaboration and analysis are among the key potential key source of power within the NGO movement more widely. In combination, they are potentially transformative. For example, the use of analysis and case studies to drive action is a feature of the model that has been successfully used in the UK-based "Roundtable on Climate Change and Poverty"; a coalition of leading environmental and social justice groups which argues that tackling climate change offers a huge opportunity for boosting the economy and alleviating poverty in the UK. The Roundtable's work has involved reflections on case studies and research reports and it is these that have in part driven joint action. Members of the Roundtable are nonetheless free to withdraw from any part of the activities (for example where these do not fit individual organisational priorities), without withdrawing from the Roundtable as a whole.

One idea for our own group going forward is to look to progress collective understanding through collaborative work to consider in more detail the fit between participatory processes related to environmental justice and sustainable development on the one hand and policy cycles on the other. The Eden Project's public engagement work linked to the proposal for a Clay Country Eco-Town in villages near St Austell, for example, offers many insights. Participation and involvement have to be more than simply campaign tools that NGOs deploy in pursuit of wider policy goals; but for that to happen, it is important to find ways to connect to the policy cycle.

Our next meeting, in January 2010, will consider these and other options for collaborative action at the interface of democracy, environmental justice and sustainable development.

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Note: About us

Capacity Global is the only UK based think-tank and non-governmental-organisation working solely on environmental justice. Its aim is to promote environmental justice, understood as the realisation of everyone's right to live in a clean and healthy environment. It has recently been awarded the Social Enterprise Mark for its social and environmental impacts: the first national Think Tank and environmental NGO to be awarded the Mark. Capacity Global has been instrumental in developing the environmental justice policy and community-led agenda in England. It is a founding member of the international PP10 project which aims to promote and review national environmental justice indicators. It has recently launched the Hard to Reach? initiative to improve the environment's sector action on working with 'excluded' groups. The organisation works specifically with vulnerable communities to ensure that their voices get hold in environmental decision making and participation; and that they get equal economic, social benefits from environment decisions. It does this through its four programmes: outreach, policy, advocacy, training and green jobs.

The **Carnegie Trust UK** investigates areas of public concern so as to influence policy and practice in the interest of democracy, civil society and social justice. The Trust is now at the concluding stages of a major future-facing Commission of Inquiry on civil society, which has considered the current and potential future roles of civil society across a range of key areas. Sustainability and climate change; growing inequality and social justice have been key motifs in the Inquiry's work. Another priority area has been to enhance the understanding of non-environmental groups about climate change; and the potential role that they could play in contributing to adaptation and mitigation.

The **Community Development Foundation** is a non-departmental public body and registered charity. It was established by statute, receives core funding from the government's department for Communities and Local Government and distributes funding to community-based organisations, carries out research and capacity-building and acts as an advocate for the community development sector. CDF's vision is for an inclusive and just society and its mission is to lead community development analysis and strategy in order to empower people to influence decisions that affect their lives. CDF was the accountable body for the Every Action Counts initiative which concluded in March 2009. As a result of that experience, a new Strong Communities team was created within CDF which includes a focus on communities engaging on issues of sustainable development.

The **Community Sector Coalition** is a national umbrella of about 25 organisations with a predominant interest in the community sector. A particular concern is a worry that community sector organisations are squeezed out of policy processes that pay insufficient attention to more informal or organisationally smaller parts of the sector. A process to develop a new strategic plan beyond 2010 is currently under way within CSC; a social justice take on climate change is likely to form a major part of this. Like the Community Development Foundation and Capacity Global, the Community Sector Coalition has been involved with 'Every Action Counts', a sign-on initiative encouraging groups to take action to tackle environmental issues.

Democratic Audit is an independent research organisation which has developed a methodology to measure the quality of democracy across multiple criteria. The full audit framework is currently being applied in the UK for the third time since 1992 to enable an assessment to be made of change

over time. The framework has also been adopted by International IDEA and applied in other countries, making it possible to make detailed comparisons of how democracy in the UK compares with a selection of other 'mature' democracies. A major task now is to develop criteria that can help to measure the robustness of democracy in the face of very difficult issues like climate change: how to make decisions that are likely to be unpopular with a majority of the electorate?

The **Eden Project** is a visitor attraction in mid-Cornwall, with more than one million annual visitors since it opened in 2001, and a wider educational mission to promote public understanding of sustainable development. The Eden Project has a huge opportunity to reconnect people with nature by telling stories that inspire people and seed ideas. Eden runs a wide range of outreach projects both on site and nationally to encourage people to get involved in creating better futures. Projects such as Mud Between your Toes (connecting children with the outdoors), the Big Lunch (an opportunity to get to know your neighbours), and the Great Day Out (focusing on re-engaging young people who have been excluded), are examples of how Eden uses practical and creative approaches to involve people in re-imagining their futures. Eden's work has the potential to unlock new kinds of public engagement on environmental justice and sustainable development - a specific example of which was the arts-based public consultation that Eden and other partners ran in the six villages shortlisted for a 'Clay Country' eco-town.

The **Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development** works to develop ideas and innovative practices so that democratic decision-making can deliver sustainable development outcomes; outcomes that can be elusive when elected representatives or citizens think short, not long-term, or when economic goals are consistently prioritised over social or environmental justice. We believe that democracy will need to adapt and evolve to meet twenty-first century sustainable development challenges, and that it will need to do so fast. Our events, analysis and engagement aim to work out who needs to do what to make sure that democracy delivers sustainable development. The Foundation was launched in September 2009.

The charity **Involve** works to promote more participative democracy; and specifically to examine the space between representative and deliberative democracy. Among other projects, Involve recently led the UK contribution to World Wide Views on Climate Change, based on engagement with people in the English town of Kettering. In contrast to more pessimistic polls to have emerged recently, showing that, once provided with information and space to deliberate, a larger majority wants the government to move further than its current commitments than polling of uninformed members of the public would suggest. The Kettering work represented a UK contribution to a wider international project in 38 countries.

The **National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement**, based in Bristol, works to inspire culture change in how universities engage with the public. This speaks to a key concern about the ability of democracy to deliver sustainable development given the need to find ways to bring expert insights: for example those related to scientific risks associated with climate change or genetically modified crops- to inform public preferences and political leadership.

Charles Secrett is a long-time sustainability campaigner with an interest in finding ways to tackle the weaknesses of progressive movements working for environmental justice and sustainable development and their power in established decision-making processes.