



The Relationship between Democracy and Sustainable Development

Briefing

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Summary

At one level, the ideas and reality of sustainable development and democracy overlap and are interdependent. Common to both sustainable development and democracy is participation – the ability of all people to come together and be involved in decisions about how we live and the goals we want to achieve as societies. There are also tensions and differences between the two ideas which need to be resolved in order for current political democratic systems to adapt in the direction of achieving sustainable development.

Pressures on our current democratic systems, particularly the demand for a very different kind of politics or engagement, and the challenges of tackling complex problems, also imply that our democratic system and practices need to evolve.

This paper sets out both the similarities and tensions between democracy and sustainable development, and scopes out the ways in which these tensions might be resolved.

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Introduction

Since 2009, FDSO has considered, debated and offered proposals on how to develop a more constructive relationship between sustainable development and democracy. In 2015, FDSO is relaunching its work – in the same year that the UN Sustainable Development Goals will be finalised, and the Paris United Nations Climate Conference (COP21) is likely to agree a legally-binding and universal agreement on climate.

There have also been several years of upheaval amongst established democracies, with many indications that democratic political models – developed since, and designed for, the circumstances of the Industrial Revolution – are struggling to cope in a world of decreased deference, diversity, mass education and rising expectations.

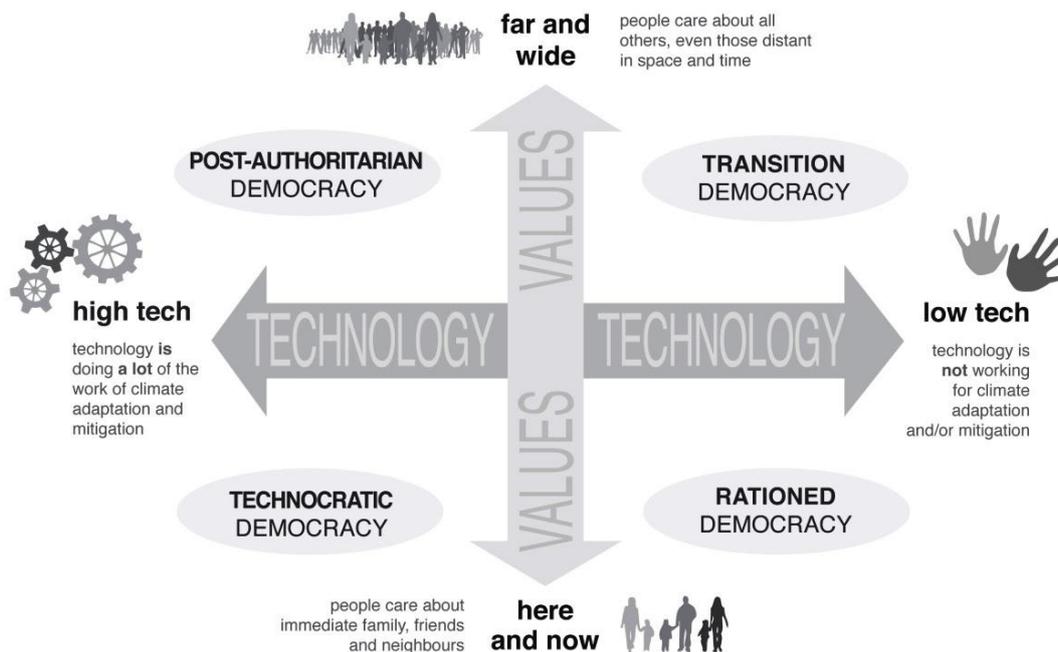
This paper draws together the conclusions of FDSO's six years of work from 2009 to 2014, alongside relevant practical, policy and academic developments, to set out the nature of the problem, and point to some areas for its resolution.

So what's the problem?

In 2008, people from business, civil society and government agreed at an FSDS event that liberal democracies seem currently unable to adequately manage and deliver sustainable development (Lotherington & Elkington, 2008). Suggested reasons included: **policy incoherence**, the **inertia of democratic structures**; and **distrust of politics and the political process**. Two wider trends were also seen to contribute: an **increasingly fragmented and disaggregated world**; and the **primacy of a particular form of economics** as a way to think about success, or inform decision-making.

Other insights arose from an FSDS meeting of NGOs: political leaders feeling unable to take a lead on sustainable development with **no critical mass for change**; **lack of ability to cope with environmental limits**; and too **little attention to collaboration**.

A paper by FSDS's then director, Halina Ward, added yet more dimensions: **short-term thinking**; **inability to engage unrepresented interests**; **difficulty in dealing with trade-offs**; and failure to **integrate governance levels** (Ward, 2009). She developed this thinking in five papers on *The Future of Democracy in the Face of Climate Change*, creating four possible future scenarios: 'transition democracy'; 'post authoritarian democracy' (after failures in coercion), 'technocratic democracy' based on authoritarian hierarchies and expert commissions; and 'rationed democracy' (Ward, 2012). These alternative futures are based on differences in the level of available technology to solve climate change challenges, as well as the existence or otherwise of supportive norms and values which enable climate change adaptation and mitigation.



The kinds of problems and scenarios raised by FSDS resonate with those developed by other commentators (for example, Meadowcroft *et al* 2012; Beckman, 2008; and Blühdorn, 2012). Lafferty (2012) argues in 'The Impasse of Dysfunctional Democracy', that the interaction between democracy and sustainable development does not receive enough attention, and its implications require not just adaptation, but transformation of our democratic political systems. The radical changes to our economic, social and environmental practices (or transitions) that appear necessary are also likely to require more co-ordination and engagement between government, people, civil society and business, implying a different and more widespread form of democratic politics.

Similarities and overlaps

The ideas and reality of **sustainable development and democracy** can and do **overlap**. They can be interdependent and reinforcing. For example, common to interpretations of both sustainable development and democracy is **participation** – the ability of people to come together and be involved in decisions about how we live, and the goals we want to achieve as societies.

Democracy can enable **high levels of innovation** and **responds quickly** to challenges. The **justice, legitimacy** and **transparency** achieved by democratic contests and safeguards can also make the achievement of sustainable development fairer, more widely justified, and accepted.

The **survival of democracy** will be challenging in an unequal, resource-constrained and overheated world. In other words, sustainable development is a pre-requisite for flourishing democracies.

There is though no necessary link between sustainable development and current existing democracies.

What is sustainable development? (Adapted from FSD's website)

The idea of 'sustainable development' became widespread with the 1987 publication of [Our Common Future](#), a report from the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission). Its definition of "*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" still provides the broad underpinning for current thinking and practice, based on balancing people's economic and social needs with the preservation and enhancement of natural resources and ecosystems.

Sustainable development can be understood as both a *process* (a way of doing things, including principles and values) and a set of *desirable outcomes* (such as the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) being developed in 2015). However, there are different ways of thinking about how sustainable development is best conceptualised, and put into practice. Our understanding continues to change, particularly with increasing scientific knowledge of environmental impacts, and through participatory processes which help articulate and determine priorities and desired goals.

What is democracy? (Adapted from FSD's website)

Democracy has long been a deeply contested idea and set of practices. Its value rests on the core principle of political equality. All members of a political community have equal rights to affect decisions made in their name. This simple formula ensures individuals and social groups are treated with dignity and respect and have the necessary autonomy and freedom to flourish.

To be recognized as 'democratic', institutions and systems also need to realise a number of aspects:

- *Inclusiveness*: all members of a political community have the right to participate and should have their voices heard:
- *Popular control*: decisions rest with the political community as a whole:
- *Considered judgement*: individual and collective decisions should be based on people being adequately informed and understanding the positions of others:
- *Transparency*: decision-making should be open and accountable.

Practical elements of a flourishing democracy are generally agreed to be: a strong civil society, an active and free press, strong and fair legal system, checks and balances on power, and free and fair elections. However, democracy is about much more than elections and representative government. More deliberative decision-making, and other ways of choosing who is in power, such as by lot, have long been part of democratic political systems, as has the importance of contributing to society.

Tensions

There are tensions between the current practices of actually existing liberal democracies and the principles of sustainable development. These strains can prevent or undermine efforts to tackle challenges such as climate change, or inequality. However, they are not simply opposites. And it is not difficult to begin to see how they might be reconciled.

As a starting point for further work, the Table below sets out some of the inter-linked tensions that will need to be considered and resolved if our current democratic political systems are to evolve and respond effectively to the challenges of sustainable development.

Tensions between existing liberal democracies and sustainable development

Existing liberal democracies	Sustainable development implications
Responsive and adaptive, although with tendency to short-termism	Long-term impacts and focus on intergenerational equity and stewardship
Defined political geographies and legally defined citizens	Drivers and impacts cross political geographies, and governance levels. Affected people include those in other political jurisdictions and future generations
Economic growth given primacy	Sustainable development requires integration and trade-offs between economic, environmental and social considerations
Environmental limits not generally taken into account	Environmental limits to human activity
Tendency towards policy silos and the use of socio-economic policy tools for choice and resource allocation	Integrated and precautionary policy in recognition of complex and uncertain environmental, economic and social impacts and interactions; supported by multi-criteria and multi-discipline policy tools
Competing ideas	Shared goals
Individual freedom as dominant ethic	Shared values which incorporate future orientation and concern for nature

Short-term versus long-term

This is perhaps the most widely considered tension between democratic political systems and sustainable development, arising primarily from short electoral cycles that tend to focus political promises and strategies on short-term outcomes; the influence of established and entrenched interests; and pressure created by citizen's short time horizons (for example, Thompson, 2010). The 2013 final report of the Oxford Martin School Commission for Future Generations, *Now for the Long Term*, comprehensively analyses short-termism in society, politics and business, calling: "for a radical shake-up ... to deliver progress on climate change, reduce economic inequality, improve corporate practices and address the chronic burden of disease."

More specifically, Charles Clarke, a previous UK government minister, argued in *The Too Difficult Box: The big issues politicians can't crack* that the political culture of adversarialism, and the short-termism encouraged by five-year electoral cycles, block effective responses to issues such as climate change, security, food systems, pensions and ageing.

Political geography and citizenship

Causes and impacts of sustainable development challenges are not confined to separate politically defined places. Effects of activities in one political jurisdiction may affect others far away and across time (for example, climate change). And the boundaries of ecosystems may not coincide with political boundaries (for example, water courses). Decisions made by those alive today affect others yet to be born who will realise both benefits of activities today, but also have to bear the costs of any resulting harm. There is therefore a 'representation gap' since currently affected, but disenfranchised people, future generations, or even nature itself, are not included in the decision-making which affects them. This situation makes it less likely that long-term and sustainable development issues are taken into account.

There are challenges in filling this representation gap. If future generations are represented alongside others, how are their interests and needs to be known, or how much impact should they have on decision-making? One answer is not to close off options, for example, by maintaining or enhancing the environment, not incurring unpayable debt or creating excessive inequalities. There is also a need to preserve future democratic freedoms, which may imply restrictions on current decision-making, unless rigorously justified (Beckman 2008; Thompson 2010).

Economic growth prioritised

Existing liberal democracies prioritise economic growth as the driver of societal progress and success. The tax returns created from economic activity are seen as essential to pay for public goods such as infrastructure or healthcare. Growth implies more services, the ability to redistribute, and to pay down borrowing; as well as the main way to increase the quality of people's lives.

For critics, unlimited growth is neither possible nor desirable, because of its social and environmental consequences (for example, Jackson, 2011). Economic activity should in this view be socially and environmentally responsible; drivers of a good society should be more diverse; including strong communities and an enhanced natural environment; and success should be measured against much wider benchmarks than GDP.

Implications of environmental limits

The idea of planetary boundaries was introduced in 2009 by Rockström and colleagues in [Nature](#), reactivating debate about *limits* to human activity. Their analysis suggests that the 'safe operating space for humanity' has already been breached in some cases, such as climate and land-system change. Meadowcroft (2012) sees such 'limits' as one of the main challenges to our current political models – whether seen as ecological constraints, limits to our capacity to manipulate nature, to our current materialistic development model, or as self-restraint.

Limits therefore represent a potential constraint on democratic decision-making. However, scientific uncertainty requires engaged decision-making to better understand the options we face, and to ensure democratic legitimacy for difficult choices (Lafferty, 2012). But limits can also be compatible with democracy, for example, human rights limit harm and enable freedoms (Meadowcroft, 2012).

Policy silos versus integrated and precautionary policy

Governments tend to separate and communicate policy in specific areas, often drawing on equally specific academic, professional and NGO expertise. The result is a fragmentation of policies and

delivery, leading potentially to wasted resources or conflicting activities. Changing this situation is widely recognised as challenging, for example, 'joining-up' say primary health, social care, and housing. We have yet to work systematically through the wider implications of how sustainable development can be better realised through the co-ordinated activities of currently disparate areas of activity, and/or more radical changes to political architecture.

The policy tools available are generally underpinned by particular socio-economic methodologies which struggle to incorporate the necessary balance between economic, social and environmental concerns. For example, they tend to fail to deal with environmental or social limits, incorporate inappropriate discounting of the future; and struggle with scientific uncertainty, or normative values (for example, Söderbaum, 2012).

Competing ideas or shared goals?

Sustainable development is generally seen as both a *process* (or way of doing things underpinned by principles such as integration or participation) and as a set of *outcomes*. These outcomes are not necessarily concrete goals. However, in practice, it appears that only with the development of some clear goals and targets, have communities and governments begun to make the idea real and tangible, and develop appropriate policies. This does not mean that such goals cannot change and be debated, adapt to different cultures, or be temporary stepping stones on any sustainable development pathway. However, their development implies processes very different to the contest of competing propositions made by political parties. Since, 2012, for example, the UN has encouraged member states to develop together inter-connected Sustainable Development Goals to be implemented nationally.

Democracy is often seen simply as a way of getting things done and making decisions. Principles such as 'popular control' and 'political equality' inform what democratic activities should look like, but they do not tell us anything about the goals we should aim for, other than those which protect the democratic system itself. Contested ideas are a core and necessary part of democracy. In representative electoral systems competing political parties suggest their own visions of the 'good life' and how to achieve this. On some issues, though, there is a recognition of the need for more effective cross-party collaboration. For example, before the UK's 2015 General Election, the then three main parties jointly committed to work together to combat climate change.¹

Individual freedom or shared values?

A core principle of liberal democracies is the idea of individual freedom, understood as 'non-interference'. The extent to which this is balanced with other values depends on particular cultural circumstances. In comparison, much discussion around sustainable development implies the need to develop more shared values and norms to better understand, and respond, to the widespread and inter-connected nature of challenges, opportunities and impacts. These values and ethics already exist to some extent, but are often overwhelmed by appeals to individual self-interest.

The salience of individual rights, and the economic and societal trends that promote individualism, create difficulties for the development of a more communal and ecological ethics. Robert Seddon (2013) for example, has argued that there seems to be hostility to any vision which "subsumes the individual human being into a greater whole", and for the need to develop a new moral vocabulary to underpin democracy.² Others have proposed the need to develop a new ethic of stewardship of nature, or an enhanced view of the common good incorporating 'ecological integrity' (for example, Baker, 2012).

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-31456161>

² An [FDSD event](#) included a discussion on how democracy has, following [Colin Crouch](#), become 'hollowed out', partly through mass affluence and rising inequality, making collaboration or empathy for others difficult.

Resolving tensions

FDSD has begun to explore potential solutions to the democratic challenges of tackling sustainable development, as have an increasing number of organisations and commentators. These solutions tend to respond to several tensions, but not all. There is no one easy solution. From what we know so far, there needs to be attention to multiple areas: such as how our democracies engage citizens; supportive norms, values and awareness raising; the technical details of how we choose and value policy options; the changing roles of civil society and business; or the potential for different democratic ‘spaces’ to respond to multi-level and multi-spatial challenges. This doesn’t mean less democracy. But it often means doing and thinking about democracy differently. Innovative ideas and practices challenge current democracies to become *more* democratic. They can and should work alongside ideas which encourage us to think more long-term, and more widely, about what matters.

There is much evidence of the **importance of increasing participation** in sustainable development strategies to improve decisions and implementation; as well as to increase justice, legitimacy; acceptance, trust and learning. It also contributes to conflict resolution where there are trade-offs. The design of participation is critical. Deliberative forms of participation have shown that people can manage complex decisions, and tend to shift towards ‘other-regarding’ and longer-run perspectives. Graham Smith, a trustee of FDSD, has argued, however, that participation tends to be currently used mostly for single issue rather than broad-based strategy; is poorly integrated into policy processes; and rarely used in scrutiny and monitoring – suggesting ways forward (Smith, 2015a).

Independent institutions in democratic systems are one way to reduce short-term bias, bringing the concerns and implications of the long-term, future generations and sustainable development into decision-making. Existing examples have different powers and functions (from advice to legal review) and with varying degrees of enforcement. The World Future Council (WFC) and the Oxford Martin School have worked on these issues, and a network is being set up by the Hungarian Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. FDSD has contributed through work before Rio+20 with WFC on proposals for a UN High Commissioner for Future Generations (Pearce *et al*, 2012; Ward, 2012), and on *The Democratic Case for an Office for Future Generations* (Smith, 2015b).

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) introduced a duty on public bodies to meet wellbeing goals whilst observing the sustainable development principle. It also establishes a Future Generations Commissioner for Wales to advocate for future generations and advise and support public bodies to carry out their duties under the Act. The potential of the Welsh Act is also designed to meet the **challenges of multi-level governance** by co-ordinating national level strategy and local level implementation.

Related **parliamentary and local government changes** have been suggested, such as a revised second chamber; sustainability impact assessments; Parliamentary Select Committees with teeth; or even a fourth power to represent future generations, suggested by Tremmell (2014). Roderick (2010) set out ten potential governance changes for the UK, in work commissioned by FDSD and WWF; and Sara Parkin’s *Are political parties getting in the way of the sort of collaborative democracy we need to tackle sustainability?*, from 2008, continues to be thought-provoking.³

Such shifts are supported by constitutions, rights and law which embed the long-term, nature, future generations and sustainable development (such as the Ecuadorian Constitution which gives rights to nature), and by widespread understanding and awareness to encourage more effective solutions and form the basis of more shared values and norms. [Common Cause](#) for example has worked to foster ‘intrinsic’ values – those supporting, for example, care for others and concerns for the natural world; rather than ‘extrinsic’ values that reinforce, say, individual wealth accumulation.

³ FDSD also provided written evidence in 2010 on a [government inquiry into strategic thinking in Whitehall](#) Government, and in 2011 on [how to embed sustainable development across the UK Government](#).

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