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Democracy, Civil Society, Sustainability

Here are four propositions about democracy, environmental/sustainability campaign organisations (SD-NGOs from now on) and ecologically sustainable development. They present a paradox about the relationship between democracy, civil society and sustainability. Resolving the paradox is an urgent and complex task for the West, for newly industrialized democracies, and for emergent democratic civil society in the developing world.

1. Democracy is crucial for humane and just sustainable development. Democracy can be shown to be very closely associated with high standards of ecological protection and effective implementation of environmental law. We cannot begin to tackle big environmental challenges without democracy and all it is based on – rule of law, open society, free media, experimentation and low levels of corruption. The worst cases of unsustainable development at local and regional scales are being exacerbated above all by the misrule of authoritarian regimes. The many non-democracies can tackle unsustainable development only by adopting democratic processes and moving to open societies based on the accountable rule of law.

2. Democracy poses huge problems for sustainable development. In the advanced liberal capitalist states, democracy is tightly coupled to the promise of economic growth, ever-rising consumption and individual freedom. Democracy in such states now entrenches the interests of the affluent majority and well-funded lobbies in the political system, as analysed by among others JK Galbraith and Mancur Olson. Representative democracies have become sclerotic and there is a widespread problem of public trust and apathy in the OECD world. Politicians cannot challenge vested consumer and producer interests for fear of losing votes, lobby and media support, and associated funding. This makes democracies incapable of mobilizing citizens to tackle collective action problems on a big scale – above all, climate disruption and the need for deep emission cuts. The worse the performance of democracies in dealing with the ‘hard politics of the environment’ (Tom Burke) the greater the temptation to see authoritarian

command economies as the key to pushing societies on to sustainable development paths.

3. SD-NGOs are a massive success for civil society worldwide. Without them, we would not have anything like the progress we have seen in the past half-century in protecting the environment, cutting pollution, raising resource efficiency, highlighting linked issues of environmental and social injustice, and saving wildlife and habitats from destruction. Without them, the discourse and practice of sustainable development would not have become established in governments worldwide, and huge issues such as climate disruption would not have been acknowledged or tackled sufficiently by governments and businesses. SD-NGOs have been at the forefront of civil society's emergence in authoritarian states and have played a key role in fostering democratic trends and challenges to abuses of power.

4. SD-NGOs are a massive failure by their own standards. For nearly 50 years they have campaigned and educated citizens and governments and businesses worldwide ; yet ecological damage continues on a vast scale, environmental injustices abound, and dangerous climate disruption seems to be unavoidable. SD-NGOs have achieved limited gains in specific areas of policy but have failed to mobilize and energise citizens on a large enough scale to put real pressure on politicians and businesses in the West and beyond. Moreover, they lack clear answers to challenges to their own legitimacy and accountability, and have sometimes spoken as though they were representative voices of 'civil society', while in fact constituting a small and highly unrepresentative section of it in many countries.

So: democracy is crucial and necessary for decent and equitable sustainable development, but is it not coupled tightly to the established Growth Model, so much so that it cannot deal with deep risks stemming from the excesses of the Growth Model?

So: the campaigns of SD-NGOs are vital and necessary for sustainable development, but are they not a huge collective failure given the accelerating damage to ecosystems worldwide, the persistence of deep poverty, and the resistance to serious action on climate disruption?

So: how do we connect democracy and sustainability? What is the future for SD-NGO models and their relations with wider civil societies and governance systems in a world

of systemic ecological disruption, widespread authoritarian rule and sclerotic democracy, leading to complex collective action problems?

Hard Politics and Open Societies:

some discussion points on sustainability, climate action and the open society

Averting major disruption of the climate system is arguably the biggest collective challenge governments, businesses and citizens have ever faced in peacetime. Unlike a war of survival, as in 1939-45, it presents collective action problems on a huge scale. In war, nation-states can mobilise against a clear and present danger and can usually count on strong common response from citizens and the private sector. In the case of climate disruption, the danger is neither clear enough yet nor immediate for most nations, businesses or individuals. We need a mass mobilisation of effort in advance of the greatest risk, and if we succeed we will never know the exact nature of the threats we have avoided. Moreover, we will have to make significant changes in consumption and production, many of which will be unwelcome to important interests, and we have to do it rapidly. We need to act in the face of inevitable uncertainty about the impacts that climate disruption could have.

Are there parallels with the two other huge challenges of survival faced by the liberal-capitalist democracies, namely the Depression and the Cold War? In both cases there are similarities to the climate challenge: for example, the need for radical innovation in policy, providing new incentives for cooperation, confidence-building and enterprise, in institutions and in technology. But the differences are more significant.

First, in both cases there was immediate, clear and present danger, whereas climate change is still in some eyes either ignorable or at least seen as ambiguous in its impacts and distant as a real threat to economies and civil order. Second, neither demanded a radical rethinking of economic growth and industrial development, rather an acceleration of both via new means. Third, both Depression and Cold War were tackled as systemic problems demanding expert solutions and containment techniques designed and run by policy and R&D elites. None of these holds in relation to climate disruption. We have to act in advance of the worst risks; action does demand a radical rethinking of the Growth Model for economies; and the answers require mass collaboration and a blend of bottom-up and top-down policy innovation.

The nature of the threat of climate disruption and the problems inherent in organising a response mean that there is a huge collective action issue. So many established interests are potentially damaged, or at least inconvenienced, that achieving consensus is tough. There is a temptation to deny the mounting evidence of risk and impact, or to bet that technological fixes can save the day with little or no changes required to consumption and economic growth. Fears over economic competitiveness mean that states and businesses are reluctant to make serious unilateral changes.

There is also a paradox at work relating to democracy. There is no doubt that democracy, or at least an open society, is strongly associated with progress in cleaning up and protecting the environment. Ecological policy is strongest where it is based on a free flow of information, research results, debate and experimentation. Authoritarian states are bad at environmental policy, tend to be indifferent at best to the condition of the poor and to social and ecological justice, and are bad at international collaboration. So progress in ecologically sustainable development is closely related to the quality of democracy and open politics around the world. Sustainable development will not be accelerated by benign dictatorships, assuming such things could even emerge in a world facing ecocide and associated political and economic upheaval.

But that does not mean the established democracies are necessarily well equipped to handle climate change. Democracy is associated with the conditions for exposing ecological damage and crimes, and with genuine advances in environmental protection. But it has so far only had to handle what the British policy analyst Tom Burke calls the 'easy politics of the environment' - protection of specific places and species, control of specific pollutants and sectors, and so on. Burke notes that the 'hard politics of sustainability' in the new century is another matter again. The challenge of climate change is that it arises from massively diffuse pollution, the unwanted side-effects of mass consumption patterns and globalised production systems. Democracy in the affluent world is now tightly coupled to these patterns and systems: it is based on the competition to support more consumption and more growth. Its very success has created strongly entrenched commercial and electoral interests whose comfort is put at risk by radical action to cut emissions so that we can try to stabilise the climate. Hence the success of the democracies in putting climate disruption on the policy agenda, and their failure to date to do anything truly serious about implementing change. The rise of democracy in the West is associated almost entirely with the rise of the industrial economy. This is not to say that democracy cannot exist outside an industrialised consumer society: history shows that it can. But the association with the promise of

economic growth and industrial progress is now very strong. Democracy suffered huge reversals in the Great Depression and it is very hard to envisage widespread survival of democracy if ecological disruption causes similar economic upheaval and mass decline in real incomes and employment. The high point of democracy has coincided with the high point for fossil fuel-based growth. In retreating from the fossil fuel economy, democracies cannot afford also to retreat from the Growth Model: but so far few policymakers can believe in a model of sustainable prosperity based on renewables and a closed-loop economy.

There is a deep problem here. The old democracies are in many respects sclerotic and coupled to the Growth Model, which is unsustainable in its present form (and maybe in any form). They need to revitalise their systems, through a combination of improved representative democracy and new deliberative systems that involve more citizens more often, but established political elites are reluctant to change and find it hard to combat sclerotic trends (such as the blatant gerrymandering of the US House of Representatives).

At the same time as they are failing to confront the structural weaknesses in established democracies, the leaders of the West say that they wish to see a further spread of democracy around the world, which remains deeply authoritarian in many regions. Yet this is either vastly unlikely given the ecological and other disruptive pressures already at work in countries under authoritarian rule, and in weak or emergent democracies; or, if democratisation (whether 'Western' in form or otherwise) takes place, it will do so on the basis of short-term success in delivering rapid economic growth (as in India and China) that is very likely to prove unsustainable and indeed to create near-unmanageable problems in the long run that will undermine what democratic systems have emerged. Democratisation and development of strong open societies need time. In the West it was a matter of centuries, or at least decades. Some 'leapfrogging' may be possible - the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe are a test case - but the removal of corruption, clientelism and tribal rivalry is a long and complex task. The onset of ecological disruption on a large scale reduces the time available for societies to make themselves equitably prosperous, open and law-based, and thus likely to have resilient democratic systems.

One conclusion from the above analysis is that the democracies are faced with a major challenge to their political cultures, and authoritarian states are unlikely to act until and unless they are forced to do so by unignorable ecological problems and accompanying

public unrest. (And when they do act, it is highly unlikely that they will be pursuing humane and democratic versions of sustainable development.)

Moreover, this all points to serious problems for the nation-state as an actor for sustainable development. Nations are crucial for the negotiation and implementation of regulations and collaborative deals at every level, but in important ways are too 'big' in their thinking for the local and regional-scale challenges (such as fostering micro-renewables) and too small-scale in their thinking when it comes to macro problems that demand international cooperation. There are other important problems for the national level of governance:

- virtual organisations and communities operating via the Internet can undercut or bypass national controls and standards;
- full development of civil society and democracy requires a comprehensive, high-quality and accessible educational system and open society based on free media: both are at risk of decay or arrested development in many countries because of other demands on resources and because of redirection of funds to security purposes;
- free media need to be based on a system of diverse and accountable ownership, and on enforceable standards of public interest and transparency. These are not universal by any means in the West, let alone elsewhere;
- nation-states are increasingly matched or outweighed in power to control resources by transnational corporations, whose impact in many developing countries can be to worsen conditions for democratisation and accountability, rather than to enhance them; and whose impact in the West has been to delay official recognition of and action on many environmental problems, most notably climate change, because they and their sectoral associations resist what are felt to be profit-reducing and interventionist measures;
- politicians in parts of the West, and increasingly in states subject to structural adjustment regimes influenced by neoliberalism, have for a generation sought to transfer activities, esteem and influence from the state sector to the private sector, and in doing so have often contributed to a climate of mistrust and low interest in what politics can supply in the public interest, and to a sense that private sector solutions are as a rule more efficient and desirable than those arrived at by political processes (cf Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 2007);
- SD-NGOs have contributed to this problem by conflating their dislike of unsustainable policies in the democracies with critiques of the democracies' political institutions and of politicians *per se*, and by failure to try to enter the representative system in force, instead seeking a level lobbying field with corporate interest groups. SD-NGOs tend to

demand more *deliberative* democracy, neglecting reforms of the essential *representative* democratic processes;

- the tendency at national level in many states (there are impressive exceptions) is to promote large-scale infrastructures for energy and transport, neglecting the micro-scale options that could contribute most to sustainable development. In the case of nuclear power, there are security implications that tend to reinforce problems of openness and accountability;
- rich and rapidly developing nations are now increasingly diverting resources into military systems, security and counter-terrorism, wars or preparations for war, and competition for untapped fossil fuel reserves. The opportunity costs for sustainable development are vast, and the national level tends to be the one in control of most of the purse-strings.

All this means, amongst other things, that no-one can rely on cooperation simply at the nation-state level to do the job when it comes to the biggest 'SD' challenge, that of climate change. Under the circumstances, the Kyoto framework is a near-miracle of collaboration for global public goods, but it is plainly inadequate and would be even if the USA were involved. Deeper and faster change is needed, and it is very hard to see it coming from the collective action of national governments unless conditions worsen significantly in the near term. So other sources of pressure and progress are needed, first to improve and extend the Kyoto process and second to develop a richer set of international systems linking states, businesses and local governments/civil society organisations.

One is action and lobbying about climate change from the business world. Although many businesses have an interest in resisting change, there are plenty who have much to lose from a world of climate disruption (eg insurers and shippers) and who have much to gain (eg renewable energy providers). The key task here is to re-frame the climate crisis as a paradigm shift in investment and innovation. Consider the 20-year upheaval from the late 1970s as organisations worldwide faced up to, adopted and then exploited information technologies. At the time there was major resistance and doubt about the costs, risks and gains from the 'silicon revolution', but companies and governments embraced it and ploughed colossal sums into it with very little immediate return and some increases in costs. Economies of scale and scope have arrived but they took time and long-range strategies. The scale of the challenge from climate change is even greater but the mindset required to meet it in business arguably is not different in kind from that demanded by the ICT revolutions we have been through in the

past 30 years, and which no-one in business would regard as a waste of resources or a threat to competitiveness. Yes, costs will rise and jobs will be lost as externalities are internalised; but this process will stimulate innovation, a search for efficiencies and a growth of new markets and sectors, and also a search for wholly new business models based on minimal 'footprints' and rejection of the tyranny of short-term financial performance.

Already there are encouraging signs that major companies - such as Marks & Spencer in the UK - are rethinking business models and investment strategies in the light of climate change, and calling for states to set 'long, loud and legal' normative frameworks for business reporting and planning. The more that big players break ranks from the conservatism of sectoral associations and demonstrate commitment, the more others will be encouraged, and the more politicians will be emboldened to strengthen regulatory policies on climate, such as the EU's emissions trading scheme, a flawed innovation for sure but an enormously important experiment and signal of intent and potential to the rest of the world. But the welcome moves from individual corporations are not enough. We need to see these consolidated and encouraged by national governments and the EU, and by a global framework for corporate accountability, based on UN- and IMF-endorsed principles, that promotes higher-common-denominator behaviour by corporations.

Then there is civil society, from sections of which nearly all the pressure and foresight on climate and environmental issues and on global poverty and economic/environmental injustice have come over the past two decades. The SD-NGO movements have done the world a service by generating what the US environmentalist Paul Hawken in his latest book calls 'blessed unrest' about the state of the planet. The anti-poverty movements have done the same for problems of deep deprivation and injustice. The challenge for the SD-NGOs now is not only to maintain pressure on governments and businesses, having made important breakthroughs in both domains.

Two issues stand out. First, SD-NGOs need to make closer links not only with anti-poverty/pro-development movements in order to be able to campaign on a truly 'joined-up' basis for sustainability, but also with the rest of 'civil society', including *religious communities* (which constitute the largest category within civil society globally and which need to be engaged in environmental action to complement the work many already do to combat poverty and provide services to the poor) and the other great webs of associational life in societies worldwide. This is needed in the democracies in

order to increase pressure for renewal of democratic process and improved integration of policies to promote fair and just SD. It is needed in the non-democracies to increase openness and promote democratic process and observance of the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The second issue is about the generation of demand for political action and the exacting of political penalties for failure to take SD in general and climate sustainability in particular seriously enough. There is a great need to encourage and mobilise mass public demand for action from governments and companies, so that climate leaders in both are encouraged and laggards see the benefits in catching up. So far, SD movements have not been able to achieve the mobilisation needed. Live Earth was impressive as a spectacle, no doubt, but it lacked the popular mobilisation and pressure that accompanied Live Aid and the Make Poverty History initiative. Moreover, the celebrities involved were massively compromised by their energy-intensive lifestyles and extremely recent and shallow conversion to the climate cause.

More promising perhaps is the harnessing by established and new NGOs of personal and community concern in neighbourhood-level action, amplified by contact 'horizontally' across countries and around the world via the Internet. At this level people can feel that they are making a real contribution, and with global connectedness to other micro-level networks they can feel also that they are part of a much greater initiative. Already villages in the UK, cities and states in the USA, towns and cities around the EU and in Al Gore's global city network are showing how action below the level of the state to cut CO₂ emissions can overcome some of the problems for nation-states outlined above. Much of this action is propelled by frustration at the lack of leadership and responsibility displayed at national level. And if these emergent initiatives can grow in influence and reach, and provide experiments in (for example) contraction and convergence, or in use of tradeable carbon allowances, then they too can put pressure on national governments to show real leadership, and they will also send signals to business about the rise of markets for low-carbon living services and products.

All this is the soil from which a post-Kyoto deal can grow. Kyoto and its successor are necessary but by no means sufficient, and need to be complemented by what is now emerging - a vast set of local, regional and trans-national initiatives for emissions reduction and low-carbon living. We need clear and neat international frameworks for emission targets, contraction and convergence and carbon counting, for sure; but we also need the messy, experimental Great Improvisation that is beginning in business and civil society in many countries and sectors.

Can these be brought together? Here is one idea. Why see nation-states as the key level of ratification and legitimation? What if NGOs and businesses and local governments developed a People's Kyoto, a declaration of intent at every level to cut emissions in the next 20 years so that we would be on course for an 80% global average cut from present levels by 2050? Already many US cities and states have taken up a similar challenge from Seattle to adopt Kyoto targets despite the US federal government's rejection of the Protocol.

If national governments are laggards in innovation, they need to be out-competed by parallel frameworks, which in turn could spur them to take up the leadership role they need to embrace. SD-NGOs and the (much larger) rest of civil societies have been the originators of such parallel frameworks for action. In order to overcome the structural problems in modern democracies, and the barriers thrown up by authoritarian regimes, we need widespread innovation to create more of these parallel systems now.