

Exploring the tensions: The relationship between democracy and sustainable development.

A Briefing Paper

By Andrea Westall, January 2023

Introduction

The grand challenges of our time – climate change, biodiversity loss and excessive inequality – are proving difficult for our current liberal democracies to tackle effectively. The inability to address them will not only negatively affect people's lives in the short and long-term, but also likely endanger the preconditions of any future democracy – through, for example, reduced social cohesion, excessive technocratic decision-making, or more authoritarian politics.

This briefing paper explores a range of tensions between existing liberal democracies and sustainable development, whose recognition, negotiation and potential resolution, may better enable long-lasting and beneficial solutions to be developed and implemented.

At one level, the ideas and reality of sustainable development and existing liberal democracies overlap and are interdependent. For example, common to most accounts of both sustainable development, and democracy, is *participation* – the ability of all people to equitably come together and be involved in decisions about how we live, and the goals we want to achieve together. However, there are also tensions and differences between the two ideas and practices.

At the same time, there has been a related and worrying worldwide trend of increasingly negative attitudes to some fundamental democratic principles, and growing threats to the core institutions and practices of democracy. Whilst solutions are being proposed to address these problems, discussions over the future of democracy, and how best to secure sustainable development, generally take place separately.

The purpose of this paper, and the rationale for the [Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development](#) itself, is to consider these two urgent and fundamental challenges at the same time, recognising their deep inter-relationships, and hence the necessity of tackling them simultaneously.

Whilst primarily aimed at a UK audience, it draws from examples and thinking around the world. Some potential and actual solutions are being developed in the UK and internationally. We showcase some of these on our website, and work with partners to highlight further ideas and practices, and help develop new ones.

Changing times: changing democracies

Liberal democracies, such as that in the UK, developed their current form of elected representation and separation of powers alongside, and related to, the development of the Industrial Revolution and the associated early model of capitalism, as well as the ideas coming from the Enlightenment. It is important to recognise this historical contingency. It affects both how democracy adapts to changing circumstances over time, and how it has also created inertia to change.¹ Other changes in our economy and society impact on how our democracy works, such as a decrease in deference, increase in diversity, mass education and expectations; as well as changes in how we communicate, for example, through social media.

The increased complexity and inter-relatedness of our economies and societies, as well as the unpredictability of environmental impacts, have also led to what has been called, 'radical uncertainty'.² As a result, identifying causes and devising effective solutions to some of our societal challenges, as well as exploring and implementing visions of the 'good society', seem to have become ever harder. On the other hand, we have increased our knowledge of how complex earth and societal systems work, and created ways to harness and use data to improve short and long-term decision-making.

What is democracy? (Taken from [FDSD'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 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 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 different kinds of democratic political systems.

¹ James Plunkett made a similar argument in his 2021 book [9 Ways Society is Broken and How we Fix It](#). He focussed more narrowly there on how democracy can, and needs to, adapt to address inter-generational differences in the context of a very different form of economy, and more technological society.

² John Kay and Mervyn King (2020) [Radical Uncertainty: Decision-making for an unknowable future](#), W. W. Norton & Company.

Feeling the strain

There seems to have been a worrying increase in dissatisfaction with current democratic practices, alongside a decline in their extent. [Freedom House](#), for example, reports in [Nations in Transit 2021](#), that of 29 countries in Europe and Eurasia, 18 ‘democracy’ scores had declined, 6 improved and 5 stayed the same. This was the 17th year of overall decline, with the number of ‘democratic’ countries, on their criteria, at the lowest level in the history of the report.

A 2010 paper by Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, ‘[The danger of deconsolidation: The democratic discontent](#)’ used data from three waves of the [World Values Survey](#) from 1995 to 2009. They found that trust and voter turnout had declined across the world, and party loyalty decreased. More recent generations, seem, contrary perhaps to some recent media commentary, to be less likely to engage in informal politics.

Perhaps even more worryingly, the authors observed a rise in anti-democratic views. For example, 26% of millennials thought that it was “unimportant to choose leaders in free and fair elections”. Support for “having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country” grew from 36 to 49% overall; and for “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” to 32%.³ In 1995, just 1 in 16 people thought that the army should rule; in 2010 it was 1 in 6.

A more recent report by Stephen Foa and others, [The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020](#), used wider data sets. They found that dissatisfaction with democracy within democratic countries had risen from 39% in 2005 to 58% in 2020, with a sharper upward trend since 2005. However, these trends are not inevitable. Some countries (2% of the world population) bucked this trend with increased confidence, such as Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Luxembourg; and with much of Asia avoiding this downswing.

At the same time, however, responses in [the latest wave of the World Value Survey \(2017-2021\)](#) to the question about the ‘importance of democracy’, ranked very highly. This suggests that it is the form of current democracy, and perhaps also negative perceptions of some of the people in power, that are the problem, not the fundamental concept itself.⁴

There are also some significant challenges with diversity, not only in who takes part in politics but how different concerns, particularly racial, are included within democratic discussions.⁵

What is sustainable development?

Sustainable development as a concept became widespread with the 1987 publication of [Our Common Future](#), the final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (or [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. It balances people’s economic and social needs with the preservation, and ideally enhancement, of natural resources and ecosystems.

³ Looking at the [2017-2021 World Values Survey cohort](#), the percentage in the US wanting a strong leader had risen to 38%. For the UK it was 27.6%

⁴ This question was ranked on a scale of 1 to 10 (high). 48.8% (US) and UK (54.3%) voted 10, and 92.6% (US) and 94.8% (UK) scored 5 and over.

⁵ See for example the work of the first black PhD economist in the US edited in a 2021 publication. *Democracy, Race and Justice*. Banks, N. (Ed.) (2021) *Democracy, Race and Justice: The speeches and writings of Sadie T. M. Alexander*, Yale University Press.

Sustainable development (SD) is 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](#)). However, its scope, aims and practical implications, like those of democracy, are contested. A key distinction, for example, is between those who advocate for a 'weak' or 'strong' view of sustainable development. The weak version holds that sustainable development can be achieved through technological advancement, and with minor changes to our existing approach to economics and governance; whereas the strong version implies a far more radical restructuring of society and the economy, including for example, clear and enforced limits on resource use.

The 2009 paper by Johan Rockström and others, '[Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity](#)', firmly put the language of 'limits' on the agenda. Before this model of nine planetary boundaries, the visual metaphor of sustainable development had been that of reconciling environmental, social and economic pillars of activity. This latter approach reinforced a tendency to emphasise the creation of 'win-wins' or even 'win-win-wins' between the three areas, rather than recognising and managing trade-offs. An alternative view, exemplified by [Kate Raworth's doughnut model](#) of a viable economy and society, rather indicates a 'safe operating space', bounded on the outside by environmental planetary boundaries and on the inside, by a common equitable floor of resource use to meet people's basic needs.

The 'social' aspect of sustainable development has received significantly more attention and understanding over the years, driven particularly by what have been accepted as excessively high levels of inequality – especially of income and wealth – within, not just between, countries.⁶

The increasing recognition of the variable distributional consequences of environmental policies has also underpinned a drive to better understand the dynamic trajectories of sustainable development. Getting from A to B fairly, and without undue negative disruption, lies behind, for example, ideas of a 'just transition'.⁷

Related concepts

Sustainable development is not the only concept that addresses systemic approaches to short and long-term societal goals. There is a range of terms, which, whilst not entirely synonymous, act as rallying concepts or ideas which engage different people, and groups of organisations. All of these, including 'sustainable development', have pros and cons.

For example, the term **future generations** is often used to focus attention on the long-term impacts of societal and economic decisions made today. The [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) changed its name from the 'Sustainable Development Bill' precisely because it was felt that the concept of 'future generations' had more resonance and relevance for people. A limitation of this term may be an over-emphasis on long-term thinking and action, which does not simultaneously incorporate the equally important goal of meeting short-term needs.

The related concept of **inter-generational equity** or **justice** also focuses attention on longer-term considerations, although is often used to describe and analyse the tensions between existing generations, thus relatively downplaying longer term impacts on unborn generations.

⁶ Excessive inequality is now accepted as a core 'grand challenge' by international organisations such as the [World Economic Forum](#), particularly since it is seen as damaging continued economic viability and growth.

⁷ For example, at COP26, the Paris Agreement incorporated the concept of a just transition, as defined by [2015 ILO Guidelines](#): "taking into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs" and with the UN Global Compact, ILP and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) setting up a [Think Lab on Just Transition](#).

The idea of **existential risk** has rapidly increased in usage in recent years, extending the scope of concern to include areas such as technological risk (for example, from AI or biotech), and with a focus on the dangers and urgency of neglecting these issues by emphasising extreme positions or catastrophic end-points. Examples of groups working in this area include the [Centre for the Study of Existential Risk](#) in Cambridge University, and the [Future of Humanity Institute](#) at Oxford University.

Wellbeing is another term that focuses on the entirety of a person and society's subjective and objective living standards, and their psychological and physical health. When it is conceptualised as '**wellbeing for all now and in the future**', it is very similar to sustainable development. It again widens the scope with more focus on the subjective and objective determinants of mental and physical health, and what it means to live a 'good' life.

Wellbeing in its widest sense is also similar to the idea of **social value** – a term used in the UK first to articulate the added-value of public procurement, but one increasingly [applied to the social, economic and environmental impact of any kind of organisation or activity](#). This wider usage extends beyond the UK, However, it is also confusingly used more narrowly, and contrasted with economic or environmental value. The wider view of social value is similar to business ideas of **total value** or **shared value**, which are themselves related to the goals of **impact investing** and **ESG** – environmental, social and governance criteria for investment decisions.

The relationship between democracy and sustainable development

Thinking about the relationship between democratic political systems and sustainability has been going on for decades, particularly through the concept of 'ecological democracy'. Since 2009, when FDSO was set up, there has been increased amounts of practical innovation and academic research.

A summary of the current state of play can be found in the 2022 [The Routledge Handbook of Democracy and Sustainability](#). It brings together a very fragmented and diffuse set of thoughts and research from disparate fields. However, the editors also stress that **there is still not enough work and this is just the start of the debate**. There are some clear deficits and limitations in current research, particularly a lack of rigorous evaluation of practical initiatives, and a tendency for over-generalised theory and isolated examples.

The ideas and reality of sustainable development and democracy can and do overlap. For example, common to many accounts of both is the idea of **participation** – the ability of all people to come together and be involved in decisions about how we live; the goals we want to achieve as societies; and how best to implement policies to meet the diversity of needs and challenges. The justice, legitimacy and transparency of democratic contests and safeguards can also make the achievement of sustainable development fairer, more widely justified and accepted.

It is also worth considering that the very survival of democracy could be challenged in an unequal, resource-constrained and overheated world. We can already see this happening to some extent as widening inequalities are believed to be part of the drivers behind the rising disaffection with democracy, and support for authoritarian leaders. One causal mechanism is the reduced social cohesion that arises as people's experiences of life, and of other people, become more selective and limited.

Tensions

Areas of possible tension between sustainable development and current democratic systems are set out in the table below. While presented as conflicting tendencies, in order to emphasise the possible differences, and provide a starting point for discussion, some countries and jurisdictions have already developed institutions and practices which reconcile some of these tensions.

Existing liberal democracies	Sustainable development
Tendency to short-term thinking, activity and policy design	Greater focus on long-term impacts , intergenerational equity and environmental stewardship.
Dominant ethos of individual freedom	Collaborative ethos
Competition between ideas and political parties ensures pluralism, with no single vision of the 'good life' or how to get there	Shared goals to co-ordinate activities over time
Primary focus on representative government with relatively limited public and stakeholder participation	Emphasis on more extensive public and stakeholder participation and collective decision-making
Defined political geographies and legally defined citizens	Recognition that drivers and impacts cross political geographies, time, and levels of governance ; affected parties include people in other political jurisdictions, future generations and nature
Economic growth seen as measure of success and way to deliver improved quality of life for citizens	Pursuit of individual and societal wellbeing emphasised – integrating economic, environmental and social considerations
Environmental limits not systematically taken into account	Environmental limits to economic and social activity
Decision-making divided into relatively discrete policy areas (such as health); use of socio-economic tools (eg cost-benefit analysis) for choice and resource allocation	Integrated and precautionary policy in recognition of complex and uncertain impacts and interactions; supported by multi-criteria decision-making tools



Short-termism is perhaps the most widely discussed tension between democratic political systems and sustainable development. It relates to the perceived lack of consideration of the needs of future generations, and is presumed to arise for a variety of reasons. For example, short electoral cycles tend to focus political promises and strategies on short-term outcomes, reinforced by the influence of established interests. Another aspect of short-termism is our ‘optimism bias’. In other words, we tend to believe everything will turn out fine, for example, that we will innovate our way out of climate catastrophe.

Charles Clarke, a previous UK Government minister, argued in his 2014 [The Too Difficult Box: The big issues politicians can't crack](#) that the fundamental design of our democratic system, particularly the short-termism induced by short electoral cycles, and the culture of adversarialism, blocks effective responses to issues such as climate change, security, food systems, pensions and ageing.

That is not to say that responsiveness to short-term needs and challenges is wrong. Governments are elected in order to meet citizens’ needs and to address urgent challenges in a timely way – economic crises, or unpredictable events such as pandemics.

The 2013 final report of the Oxford Martin School Commission for Future Generations, [Now for the Long Term](#), comprehensively analysed 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.”

There has been a variety of democratic and policy innovations around the world designed to counter this tendency to short-termism. They have been collectively called ‘[Institutions for Future Generations](#)’ and bring the concerns and implications of the long-term, future generations and sustainable development into decision-making. Examples include future councils; ombudsmen for future generations; revised second chambers; Parliamentary Select Committees; or even a fourth power to represent future generations.⁸ They have different powers and functions (from providing advice to legal scrutiny and redress), and with varying degrees of enforcement.

The [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act \(2015\)](#), for example, introduced a duty on public bodies to meet wellbeing goals whilst observing sustainable development principles. It also established 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 Welsh Act is also designed to meet the challenges of multi-level governance by co-ordinating national level strategy and local level implementation.

The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, [announced at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in 2021](#), that a UN Special Envoy for Future Generations and a United Nations Youth Office will be set up.

FDSD contributed to the development of the Welsh Act, as well as suggesting the creation of a [UN High Commissioner for Future Generations](#) at the [Rio+20 Conference back in 2012](#).

⁸ See for example the analysis and discussions in the 2017 edited book by Inigo Gonzalez-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries, [Institutions for Future Generations](#), OUP, and [Parliaments and future generations: The four-power-model](#) by Jorg Tremmel.



The relative emphasis placed on individual freedom (non-interference) and rights, versus a more collaborative ethic, is often taken to be a major fault line between liberal democracy and sustainable development. Much discussion around sustainable development implies shared values, norms and understanding, with an emphasis on collaborative decision-making and action to effectively realise and negotiate agreed goals. The salience of individual rights, and the economic and societal trends that promote individualism, potentially create difficulties for the development of a communal and ecological ethics, as well as action.

One position is that existing examples of liberal democracy are currently incompatible with sustainable development. For example, Felix Heidenreich argued in 2018 that a form of republicanism (in other words, relatively more emphasis on civil society and civic virtue) can better enable the creation of the collective will necessary to realise sustainable development.⁹ He does, however, acknowledge that some liberal democracies are considering the needs of future generations, through, for example, creating specific rights and constitutional settlements, which in effect constrain individual choice and/or majority rule.

Other commentators like Marcel Wissenburg, believe that in reality most democracies already express combinations of liberal and republican tendencies.¹⁰ However, he argues that a key tension still remains between individual freedom and the achievement of collective goals.

The everyday language and beliefs of particular political cultures may bias towards, and reinforce, a narrow view of democratic norms and behaviours, such as supporting a more individualistic approach and understanding. Robert Seddon, in a Provocation Paper for FDSD, for example, believes that there seems to be hostility to any vision which “subsumes the individual human being into a greater whole”, and argues for a new moral vocabulary to underpin democracy.¹¹ Yet others have argued for a new ethic of ‘stewardship’ of nature or democracy itself, or an enhanced view of the common good which incorporates ‘ecological integrity’.¹²

⁹ Heidenreich, F. (2018). ‘How will sustainability transform democracy: Reflections on an important dimension of transformation science’. *GAIA - Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society*, 27(4), pp. 357-362.

¹⁰ Wissenburg, M (2022). ‘Sustainability, democracy and the value of freedom’ in B. Bornemann, H. Knappe, and P. Nanz, *The Routledge Handbook of Democracy and Sustainability*, Routledge.

¹¹ Seddon, R. (2013). *We have a moral vocabulary of democratic citizenship, and a moral vocabulary of environmental sustainability – but can our ethics encompass both in harmony?*, Provocation, FDSD.

¹² For example, see Baker, S. (2012) ‘Climate change, the common good and the promotion of sustainable development’ in J. Meadowcroft, O. Langhelle and A. Ruud (Eds.), *Governance, Democracy and Sustainable Development: Moving beyond the impasse*, Edward Elgar.



Contested ideas are a core and necessary part of democracy reflecting people’s different views and proposed ways of achieving the ‘good life’. Political parties are the typical way in which these ideas are developed and promoted, informed through different and often ideological frames. Additionally, principles of democracy 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.

Sustainable development, on the other hand, is arguably made clear and tangible through the development of shared goals and targets, usually by agreement between a range of stakeholders. It is therefore not limited to particular political parties.

In, 2015, the UN introduced the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), a set of 17 goals and 169 targets for all countries, to be reached by 2030. Individual states are encouraged to produce [Voluntary National Reviews](#) to show their progress across all goals. As an internationally agreed ‘blueprint for action’, adaptations of the Global Goals have also been taken up by the business and finance community.

This particular tension is particularly exemplified by different political responses to climate change. Whilst the reality of climate change is still contested by a few, the differences between political parties tend now to centre around prioritisation and implementation. While appeals to move ‘beyond politics’ are common, this depoliticization and consensus around an issue can, counter-intuitively, sometimes reduce its salience¹³ This seemed to happen during the 2015 UK General Election where the then three main parties [jointly committed to work together to combat climate change](#); a consensus that did not last. At the same time, excessive adversarialism can reinforce short-termism.

Democracy requires a certain level of similarity, or collective identity. However, increasing levels of inequality have been one of the drivers behind extreme polarisation in some countries. Felix Heidenreich argues that material ‘equity’, not just political equality, is a prerequisite for effective democracy. The same argument could be made for ecological integrity, and limits to climate change.¹⁴

Constitutions constrain what is politically possible as well as signalling what is important, being symbolic as well as practical. Some new national constitutions incorporate different aspects of sustainable development or intergenerational equity. For example, in 2008, [Ecuador codified the rights of nature within its constitution](#), particularly Articles 71-74.

The UK does not have a single written constitution, but rather [constitutional Acts of Parliament, constitutional conventions, and judicial decisions](#). A 2022 report by The Constitution Society [Climate Change, the Courts and the Constitution](#) argues that the Environment Act 2021 weakens judicial redress and interpretation, giving the executive more discretionary powers. The report’s author, Joshua Kimblin, believes this “subject must be revisited in the future.... As climate change accelerates, so too must our understanding of its impacts upon the state.”

The UK Climate Change Act creates an emissions target, although ultimately it is the [policies that are enacted which do or do not determine whether that outcome](#) is reached. The Wellbeing of

¹³ This point was made in conversation by an MP to an FSD trustee.

¹⁴ Heidenreich, F. (2018). ‘How will sustainability transform democracy: Reflections on an important dimension of transformation science’. [GAIA - Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society](#), 27(4), pp. 357-362.

Future Generations (Wales) Act is another example of committing to, and agreeing, a set of overarching objectives, developed through widespread consultation.

Our trustees have also been part of addressing crucial concerns and arguments that these kind of institutions or policies could be seen as anti-democratic. For example, Graham Smith argued [The Democratic Case for an Office for Future Generations](#) in 2015 and asked [Can Democracy Safeguard the Future?](#) in a recent book. We have explored how such approaches could be adapted for the wider UK through, for example, a [Committee for Future Generations in the House of Lords](#), and contributed to the development of a [Well-being of Future Generations \(UK\) Bill](#).



A clear geographical, or other identifiable boundary, tends to be used to specify legal rights and obligations. People within a particular jurisdiction are therefore eligible to be part of democratic decision-making, as well as creating a sense of cohesion and identity.

However, the causes and impacts of sustainability challenges rarely conform to, or are confined by, separate and politically-defined geographies. The effects of activities in one political jurisdiction may affect other people beyond its physical borders, especially as boundaries of ecosystems may not coincide with political boundaries (for example, those of river basins). Equally, inclusion of those who currently live within a particular political boundary, means that those unborn have no voice (climate change being a prime example of a relevant political challenge).

The [Mekong River Commission](#) for Sustainable Development is an intergovernmental organisation supporting dialogue and co-operation in the Lower Mekong River Basin. The Mekong Agreement between Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Viet Nam led to its creation in 1995 as “a regional platform for water diplomacy and a knowledge hub of water resources management for the sustainable development of the region.”

Decisions made by those alive today affect others yet to be born, both beneficial as well as through their negative impacts or accumulated debt. If the democratic principle of involving ‘all affected people’ holds, there is a potential ‘representation gap’ here, just as there is for those in other places. Future generations are effectively disenfranchised. More generally, people at a distance, future generations, and even ‘nature’, are not included in the decision-making which affects them. This situation makes it less likely that long-term or sustainability issues can be fully addressed.

The key question for practice is whether or not future generations should or can be proxied or represented in some way, or their interests just taken into account in wider decision-making. For example, some commentators think that certain people could become representatives for future generations as long as they met certain criteria.¹⁵ On the other hand, others such as Ben Saunders, and Karsten Klint Jensen in [Future Generations in Democracy: Representation or consideration](#), have argued there is no need for actual representation of future generations because it is possible to incorporate this perspective within current decision-making (eg impartial deliberation) to achieve intergenerational justice.¹⁶

¹⁵ Byskov, M., & Hyams, K. (2022). Who Should Represent Future Generations in Climate Planning? *Ethics & International Affairs*, 36(2), 199-214.

¹⁶ Saunders, B. (2014). ‘Democracy and Future Generations’. Special issue: Ethics for a Broken World. *Philosophy and Public Issues*, 4(2), 11-28.

Existing liberal democracies

Sustainable development

Limited citizen participation ↔ Extensive citizen participation

One of the main criticisms of our current liberal democracies, particularly in the UK, is that they do not adequately engage people between elections. This is believed to be problematic for a range of reasons. Firstly, participation is seen as a good in its own right which enables people to feel engaged and empowered. Secondly, the ability of different people to come together enables us to hear other opinions and understand different perspectives, reducing prejudice and potentially creating ways forward that are responsive to difference.

Widespread discussion, and particularly 'deliberation' (democratic decision-making which involves the public in assessing the weight of evidence and agreeing ways forward), can also help create a sense of shared endeavour, something which is otherwise difficult in an increasingly fragmented world. A range of participatory and deliberative approaches that are more or less appropriate to different situations have been developed.¹⁷

There is also evidence of the importance of increasing participation in sustainable development strategies to improve the quality of decisions and implementation; as well as to increase justice, legitimacy; acceptance, trust and learning. Deliberative forms of participation, such as citizen's assemblies, for example, have shown that [people can manage complex decisions, and tend to shift towards 'other-regarding' and longer-run perspectives](#). Deliberation can also contribute to effective conflict resolution where there are trade-offs that affect people differently. Views apparently tend to converge rather than diverge as a result of deliberation; and there is evidence of people negotiating conflicting positions more positively.^{18,19}

Less supportive evidence for deliberation by, for example [Cass Sustein](#), points to a need to design robust and diverse approaches to reduce the danger of groups becoming more polarized or extreme in their views when they deliberate together, unless they engage fully with a variety of viewpoints.

However, not everyone can, or wants to be, involved. Organisers of deliberative methods work hard to ensure extensive diversity but if deliberation is to become more widespread, there may need to be more systematic support for engagement. For example, participation could be part of a voluntary or compulsory citizen's service.²⁰

Graham Smith, a previous chair and trustee of FDSD, while supportive of the turn towards deliberative practices, argued, however, that participation currently tends: to be used for one-off engagement rather than in a more ongoing, systematic way; is poorly integrated into policy processes; and rarely used in scrutiny and monitoring.²¹

One reason for this lack of incorporation of participation into democratic systems is the tension between public deliberation, parliamentary sovereignty and broader public governance. [Iceland's](#)

¹⁷ See the organisation [Involve](#) for an overview of techniques, application and outcomes.

^{18,19} Fishkin, J. S. (2009). *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ Fuchs, D. and Dolinga, S. (2022). 'Corporate power and the shaping of sustainability governance' in b. Bornemann, H. Knappe, and P. Nanz, (Eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Democracy and Sustainability*, Routledge.

²⁰ For an example see H el ene Landemore's article in a [2020 New Yorker's series on the Future of Democracy](#).

²¹ Smith, G. (2015) Options for participatory decision-making for the post-2015 development agenda, FDSD.

[draft constitution](#) was developed in 2011 using 950 randomly selected people, followed by a narrower drafting panel, and transparency through wider public scrutiny. A referendum gave ultimate sign-off by two thirds of citizens in 2012. However, this draft constitution has not, at the time of writing, yet been approved by the Icelandic Parliament.

The [Winter 2022/3 edition of FDS's newsletter](#) focused on the challenges and opportunities to embed deliberation more firmly within democratic systems, from incorporation of such processes into the work of the UK's [Climate Change Committee](#), to reconciling public governance (hierarchy and control) with deliberative democracy (horizontal and open) through [collaborative governance](#) and the development of [democratic 'infrastructure'](#).



Existing liberal democracies tend to prioritise economic growth, crudely measured as GDP, as the driver of societal progress and measure of success. The tax returns created from economic activity are often essential to pay for public goods such as infrastructure or healthcare. Growth implies more and improved services, the ability to redistribute money to those less able to support themselves, to pay down accumulated borrowing, and the main way to increase the quality of people's lives.

For critics, however, unlimited growth is neither possible nor desirable, because of its negative social and environmental consequences.²² They also raise the undeniable challenge that economic activity spent dealing with the negative impacts of environmental damage adds ironically to GDP.

Alternative ways of measuring the success of an economy have been, and are further being, developed, such as through the European Commission's [Beyond GDP](#) initiative. The encompassing idea of 'wellbeing' for all people and planet being the ultimate goal has slowly gained more traction, and is moving from a vague concept to being more concretely understood, and defined in a way which translates more easily into practice.

The Scottish Government sees wellbeing as underpinning its National Performance Framework and have created a [Wellbeing Economy Monitor](#) to assess progress. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority commissioned an [Independent Inequalities Commission](#) which recommended in 2021 to put equality and wellbeing goals 'at the heart of public policy and across the private and voluntary sectors'.



The focus on planetary boundaries has reactivated debates about the limits to human activity. 'Limits' are 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

²² Jackson, T. (2011). *Prosperity Without Growth*, Routledge.

model, or as self-restraint.²³ Environmental limits have not been recognised historically within democracy. However, recent constitutions are tending to incorporate them. Human rights already frames the space within which society and economic entities operate, and there are increasing examples of creating specific rights for nature.

On the other hand, there has also been concern that the language of 'hard and inflexible limits', as well as the increasing complexity of challenges, could create more expert-led and bureaucratic constraints on behaviour. This kind of argument implies again that the language of limits does not sit well within a culture of freedom and self-actualisation. Suggested ways to reconcile this dilemma between freedom and consensus include more deliberative engagement. Jonathan Pickering and Åsa Persson, for example, argued in 2020 that it is possible to create democratic legitimacy for planetary boundaries by using deliberation processes, such as deliberative forums, citizen risk assessments, joint advisory bodies, participatory scenario development, or periodic reviews, to negotiate targets and bring experts and citizens together.²⁴



Governments have tended to develop and communicate policy in separate areas, often drawing on equally specific academic, professional and civil society expertise. Likewise, NGOs, businesses and government have operated in silos of thinking and practice. The result is a fragmentation of policies and delivery leading at best to wasted resources, and at worst to conflicting and competing activities. The need to change this situation is widely recognised, but so are the challenges of overcoming the resistance of established institutions and entrenched practices to, for example, 'join up' primary health, with social care, housing and preventive health campaigns.

We have only begun 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 policy architecture. FSD ran a joint event in 2022 with the Institute for Government and the Bennett Institute, University of Cambridge on [Building a more effective and participatory government—to improve policy-making and delivery](#).

One barrier to more integrative thinking and action are the socio-economic methodologies, such as cost-benefit analysis or revealed preferences, that have historically underpinned policy decision making. Such tools tend to fail to deal with environmental or social limits, incorporate inappropriate or no discounting of the future, and struggle with scientific uncertainty. Whilst there is a whole range of alternative tools, such as variants of multi-criteria decision-making, or positional analysis, these do not seem to have become standardized in accessible ways to improve decision-making and accountability for hard decisions and trade-offs.²⁵

²³ Meadowcroft, J., Langhelle, O. and Ruud, A. (Eds) (2012) *Governance, Democracy and Sustainable Development: Moving beyond the impasse*, Edward Elgar.

²⁴ Pickering, J. & Persson, Å. (2020) 'Democratising planetary boundaries: experts, social values and deliberative risk evaluation in Earth system governance', *Journal of Env Policy & Planning*, 22:1, 59-71.

²⁵ See for example, Söderbaum P (2012) 'Democracy and Sustainable Development: Implications for science and economics'. *Real-world Economics Review*, 60, 107-117. Thompson, D F (2010) 'Representing Future Generations: Political Presentism and Democratic Trusteeship', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 13(1) 17-37. Ord, T. (2020). [The Precipice: Existential risk and the future of humanity](#)

Moving forward

FSD has been exploring potential solutions to the democratic challenges of tackling sustainable development, as have an increasing number of organisations and commentators. This briefing sets out some areas of tension to focus discussion on practical solutions. The aim has been to articulate the range of tensions and solutions, whilst recognising that each element deserves much deeper analysis.

Unfortunately, much of the effort so far to tackle our grand challenges involve government policies, or voluntary actions by business and civil society. This approach is not proving adequate or responsive enough. The discussion and examples here suggest we need to fundamentally reflect on the way that we currently see and practice democracy and collective governance, to see how they might better incorporate both inclusion and sustainability.

Innovative ideas and practices for democratic renewal can and should work alongside ideas which encourage us to think more long-term, and more widely, about what matters, and what is necessary to ensure the ability of future generations to thrive as well, or better, than ourselves.

Please consider working with us to explore practical ways to address these challenges.

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