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Green Outcomes in the Real World

Global Forces, Local Circumstances,
and Sustainable Solutions

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Return to a Natural World Order

Making decisions on the basis of the sustainable policy framework will diffuse the worst excesses of economic globalization without turning away from the opportunities for further progress and improved human welfare. This is a natural order for world society in which humans and nature share a healthy coexistence.

Self-Determination

The effectiveness of the policy package lies in the power and balance that is intrinsic to self-determination. This is the way to mobilize people's selfish determination to protect their society and the environment. The process of change leads through three stages as sustainability is ingrained in society from the bottom up.

First, it is clearly in the self-interest of a community to protect the structure of its society and the environment in which its members live and from which they draw the resources they need. This is an easy concept to sell. Each country and each community takes responsibility for its own population, its own society and its own responsibility to coexist with nature.

From the basis of local sustainability, a society can move into the second stage and seek to broaden acceptance of the concept of sustainability to include accepting responsibility for the global impact of our actions. Communities with a strong grasp of their own sustainability have the intellectual maturity and knowledge to understand the impact that their decisions may have on areas beyond their direct influence. It is their choice whether to act on this insight by altering their actions. At first, there may be resistance to accepting constraints where the benefits accrue outside the community. Over time, we can expect sustainable thinking to become instinctive and move beyond the zero-sum game of shunting environmental stress to someone else's patch. The evident shared benefits will encourage cooperation and coordinated sustainable thinking.

In the third stage, enlightened self-interest leads countries to exert pressure to force other countries to adopt sustainable decision making. The result is a network of countries committed to sustainability. This should not be confused with localization. Sustainable communities may have a number of resource flows with other communities and regions, but this is with full knowledge of the totality of the environmental impact.

It seems implausible that today's society could be transformed to such an extent, but I believe that once such thought processes become ingrained, a sustainable policy framework becomes feasible. It would be impossible to convert the globalized world we have now from the top down. The connections (and disconnections) are too numerous and the complexity too great. Change has to come from the bottom up.

There will be inevitably countries that do not choose to follow a sustainable path. This will be especially true in the early stages when few countries are involved and the benefits not widely acknowledged. The countries that remain outside the expanding framework of sustainable nations may find short-term advantage but they are likely to suffer in the medium term as they attempt to draw resources from elsewhere but find it increasingly difficult.

Self-determination will meet with different levels of success, depending on a number of factors including population density and resource availability. Deprivation, discomfort and hunger will still exist but the search for solutions to such problems will take place within a safe and secure global ecosystem.

In a resource-constrained world, with communities and countries taking pride in determining their own affairs, it is inevitable that there will be conflicts. A series of small disputes will act as a safety valve to diffuse tension and bring resource consumption back into balance. This will be very different to an open globalized world market in which countries that can afford to pay get what they need and the poor miss out, until finally a breaking point is reached when the market unravels to bring widespread disruption.

Beyond Globalization

Proximization is a stage beyond globalization in which the imperative of sustainability is used to override raw global capitalism. This is not turning back history. It is progressing to a safe future, building on the best of our past

achievements and backing off from the mistakes. The theories of free markets, deregulation and laissez-faire policy have been tried and tested and found wanting.

The key building block of this new world order is empowering people to work out their own way of developing a sustainable life for themselves and their community. This is how we can break out of the downward spiral of overconsumption of resources that is threatening to engulf the world, described by Garrett Hardin (1968) as the 'tragedy of the commons'. Each community and each country will take the decisions required to protect their resources and their natural heritage. Those countries with spare resources will be able to exert their power and influence to persuade other countries to adopt the same principles. The principle of sustainability will be implemented in ways that suit the circumstances, culture, capability and capacity of each country.

According to the WWF, in 1961 almost all countries in the world had more than enough capacity to meet their own demands (Hails 2008). The situation has changed radically, with many countries able to meet their needs only by importing resources from other nations.

We can quantify the situation we face by considering the Earth's capacity alongside the demands we are placing on it. Scientists have calculated that the Earth has 13.6 billion global hectares (gha)¹ of usable ecological capacity (land and shallow coastal regions). Countries and peoples of the world make differing demands on this resource. The average American requires 9.4 gha to support their lifestyle. This ecological footprint is considerably more than the 0.6 gha required by the average Bangladeshi. A typical European lifestyle falls somewhere in the middle: 4.7 gha. Australians consume 7.8 gha, while the Chinese consume 2.1 gha (Global Footprint Network 2008). Humanity's total global consumption is currently about 17.5 billion gha. This is 30 per cent more than the ecological capacity of our planet.

The true situation is likely to be far worse. Calculating a full set of ecological footprints for all the countries of the world is a time-consuming and complex process involving a considerable lead time. The figures quoted above were

1 Global hectares (gha) are hectares with world-average biological productivity (1 hectare = 2.47 acres). Footprint calculations use yield factors to take into account national differences in biological productivity. Footprint and biocapacity results for nations are calculated annually by the Global Footprint Network. The continuing methodological development of these National Footprint Accounts is overseen by a formal review committee (www.footprintstandards.org/committees).

published in 2008 based on data from 2005. Comparison with the preceding set of figures, which were published in 2006 and based on data from 2003, is worrying. The footprints of the United States and Europe show reductions of about 1 per cent. Although this is not a significant reduction, it indicates that the West has at least contained further expansion. In developing countries, ecological footprints are growing. Between 2003 and 2005, China's ecological footprint increased by over 30 per cent and India's increased by over 10 per cent. Over the same period, humanity's overconsumption increased from 20 per cent to 30 per cent more than the planet's ecological capacity. We do not yet have the results from more recent data, but there is every reason to believe that these trends have continued. Whilst we await the results of the calculations, there is nothing we can do alter the figures from 2005 to 2009. The data being gathered relates to facts we cannot now change. We should expect some very bad figures to be reported over the coming years and act now in anticipation.

It would be bad science to predict a figure for the world's overconsumption in 2009 before the data has been gathered and processed. But policy makers are disingenuous if they use the lead time to play down the risks. It is a fact that the world is overconsuming its ecological resources by at least 30 per cent, and it is a reasonable assumption that the true figure for 2009 will be considerably higher.

The combination of a lack of action by the West to make significant reductions and rapid development elsewhere in the world is severely overloading the planet. There has been much discussion over who is at fault, but the plain fact is that humans are overconsuming the planet and the pace of the consumption is increasing. Attributing blame is distracting effort that could be better spent. The West must accept that its model of development, based on high levels of consumption, is the wrong model for the world. The West must also accept a moral responsibility to develop and implement a different model that allows humanity to live sustainably.

Success will depend on the biggest countries adopting the principles of sustainability. These are the countries with the most potential to impact the global environment and the countries with the most influence over global society. Measured by CO₂ emissions, for many years the United States had the most negative influence on the global environment, until overtaken by China in 2006 (Netherlands Environment Assessment Agency 2008). How China and the United States decide to act will be critical to progress. These two countries are very different and will have to adopt different measures. The United States

is consuming 90 per cent more than its ecological capacity, but it has sufficient resources within its own borders to become sustainable by halving its per capita resources consumption. This would require reducing average consumption from 9.4 gha to the footprint of an average European (4.7 gha).² For Americans this will be a big change of lifestyle, but one which seems entirely feasible from the European perspective. For China, the task is more difficult. Its huge population is already consuming more than double its ecological capacity, even though each person only consumes 2.1 gha.³ The disparity between the situations faced by these two big countries reinforces the importance of using proximization to find sustainable living solutions. Policy that will work for the United States will not work for China, and vice versa.

Small countries also have an important role, not only to become sustainable societies to secure their own future, but also in terms of influencing global change. A small country, particularly if it has good natural resources, can lead in showing that a sustainable society is possible and is an attractive lifestyle. Sweden and New Zealand are examples, and they are leading the world in demonstrating sound environmental stewardship. Small countries can club together to use their voting power in world forums such as the UN to push for change. Some will lead in showing how to live sustainably; others will lead through explaining the dire circumstances they face because of the failure of the world community to act. For example, the people of the Maldives may be homeless before the end of this century as their islands are swamped by the sea.

Poor and populous ecological debtor nations are particularly at risk. Bangladesh is an example. Its circumstances are particularly difficult and troubling. The people of Bangladesh have one of the smallest ecological footprints on the planet (0.6 gha). The country also has a huge river delta, much of which is less than one metre above sea level. As sea levels rise, Bangladesh could lose one-fifth of its land area or more by the end of this century. Bangladesh will suffer as a result of rising sea levels that have been brought on by climate change, which in turn has been mainly caused by excess carbon emissions, mainly from the developed nations. This is evidently hugely unfair. The West has a moral obligation to help Bangladesh over the additional problems brought

2 US ecological footprint 2.8 billion gha; US ecological capacity 1.5 billion gha; US population 298 million; footprint per person 9.4 gha; average footprint per person in Europe 4.7 gha. If the United States reduced per person consumption to European levels the US footprint would drop to 1.4 billion gha.

3 China has a total biocapacity of 0.9 gha per person and a consumption of 2.1 gha per person, based on Global Footprint Network 2005 data.

on by rising sea levels. As governments and aid agencies search for ways to help, the solution will come from the delivery of social objectives (as discussed further in Chapter 8). There will be no place for imposing the Western model of development, or measuring progress by coarse economic measures such as GDP.

Measuring Progress

The management of a sustainable world society needs clear objectives. The old measures of development based on pure economic measures, such as GDP, are obsolescent. As the principle of sustainability embeds into world society, finance will drop down from being the prime objective of policy to a facilitating function. It will take time to develop appropriate measures such as National Resource Accounting (Harris and Fraser 2002) to bring ecosystem integrity on to the balance sheet. We will also need appropriate measures for society that include health and happiness such as the Human Development Index (HDI) launched by the UNDP in 1990 (UNDP 1990). Richard Layard (2005) explains the paradox that as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier. Bhutan's measurement of Gross National Happiness (GNH) (see p. 48) may not seem inappropriate as sustainable policy making takes root.

It will take time to unlearn the lessons of our materialistic upbringing, but, over time, many more people will learn to put quality of life before materialistic measures such as income and consumption. As the cohort of converts expands, people will find that they are judged by their contribution to the community and society. In communities, people are respected for the extent to which they are seen to contribute to the common good. The idea that the rich should be admired for being rich was always rather odd, but in a sustainable society this will be out of place. Tight communities naturally adopt these different measures. Financial wealth becomes a means for personal security, of course, but also a way to move up the hierarchy by paying back into society. Flaunting wealth and conspicuous consumption will go out of fashion. Making a donation to public facilities, which might then be named after you, will be a more acceptable and effective display of material wealth.

We tend to forget that such behaviour has always been part of society. For example, the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie is still remembered in a plaque on the walls of our local library. Carnegie the industrialist has been long forgotten. There is some evidence of a resurgence in personal measures

of success rather than the simple measure of wealth. For example, Bill Gates' lasting legacy will be the Gates Foundation, not the personal wealth he accrued in his business career.

In measuring success, there is no need to aspire to a commune in which everything is shared equally. Differential benefits are acceptable when the community recognizes that this is the reward for delivering collective outcomes for the community. Senior leaders, managers and entrepreneurs can all earn materially more, without generating envy or resentment, if their efforts benefit the community, and this is seen to be so.

A New Sustainable World Order

A sustainable world will be full of variety: some societies may be dull and dependable, others vibrant and chaotic. There will be islands of paradise and sinks of despair. This is how the human world has always been. The struggle to live will continue, mixing pleasure with pain, and periods of hardship with periods of plenty. The new ingredient will be confidence that the generations to follow can enjoy the same struggle for life in circumstances of long-term macro stability.

The actions we take should hold society to the concept of sustainable living without stifling innovation. In the future, our inquisitive nature and drive for progress could take us to other planets and other solar systems, but this will not happen if those same human traits have destroyed the ecosystem and, with it, civilization. There is a credible risk that the complex web of society unravels in a struggle for resources in a globalized, overpopulated and overconsuming world (McManners 2009). This Armageddon alternative must be avoided.

In order to construct the new sustainable world order, society and the economy will have to change in tandem. The following chapters outline the parameters within key policy areas. The two most difficult challenges are population dynamics (discussed in Chapter 8) and developing workable mechanisms to implement green financial markets (discussed in Chapter 9). First, I will address the greening of global commodity flows. This is fairly easy to define but it will be very hard to implement, as the actions required will be seen as a reversal of previously successful policy.