

7. A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

➤ LECTURE NOTES

Environment & development

- The nature and range of issues
- Differing perspectives on such issues

Sustainable development

- The Earth Summit 1992
- Contested notions of sustainability

A sustainable society

- A feasible possible future
- Some key characteristics

➤ KEY READING

- Worldwatch Institute (2008) *State of the World 2008*, Earthscan
- UN Division for Sustainable Development ~ www.un.org/esa/sustdev/

➤ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do you respond to the need to work towards a more sustainable future?
- What do you see as some of the possibilities and implications for education?

➤ LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Critical understanding of debates relating to the notion of sustainability
- An awareness of the need for present choices to reflect preferred futures

LECTURE NOTES

1. ENVIRONMENT & DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

The natural environment encompasses what is known as the biosphere, that narrow zone of earth, air and water, which surrounds the planet and on which all life (plants, creatures, humans) depends. Many crucial environmental issues are in the news, ranging from climate change, the safety or otherwise of GM (genetically modified) crops, sources of energy – nuclear, fossil fuel or renewable - to food safety, the nature of modern farming, transport problems in cities, conflict over water resources, and the loss of natural habitats and species. In different ways these issues affect your community now and will continue to do so in the future.

The term development, as used here, refers to social and economic development both within countries and internationally. Since the late 60s it has been increasingly recognised that global development is uneven and thus threatens the livelihood and lives of a large proportion of the world's population. Many development issues are in the news, from the impact of globalisation, world trade agreements, food and malnourishment, to people having to become refugees, health and disease, and the need for fairer trade. In different ways these issues too affect your community now and will continue to do so in the future.

Ideological debates

Views on environment and development are deeply influenced by people's attitudes and values. This does not mean that everyone has a different view but that a number of broad ideologies can be identified - an interrelated collection of beliefs and values held by a large number of people in society. These beliefs are so deep-seated that they are held to be 'true' by their proponents and not seen as open to question (see Session 4: Ideology and Education). During the 1970s, as the current environmental movement began to gather force, various ideological differences began to emerge depending on how people analysed the nature of the 'problem', the causes of it, the likely consequences of it and the action needed to resolve it.

Two examples of differing environmental ideologies are technocentrism and ecocentrism. A technocentric worldview sees people as separate from nature and nature as a resource to be used for human benefit. In particular this view sees technology as the answer to

environmental problems. Technocentrics tend to look at the world in a mechanistic and utilitarian way and are sometimes described as 'light green', i.e. concerned about environmental matters but without feeling that any radical changes need to be made to people's lifestyles as a result. They are thus reformist in their objectives believing that environmental problems can be resolved by a mix of new technology, legislation and public awareness without any deeper changes.

An ecocentric worldview is nature-centred and argues that human beings are but one element in the web of life and that protection of the biosphere is more important than individual human needs, especially if those needs cause damage to the environment. Ecocentrism sees the mechanistic industrial/technological worldview as the cause of most environmental problems and nature as offering more organic and holistic models of possible ways forward. Ecocentrics consider themselves to be 'deep green' because they argue for major radical changes in our behaviour and in society with capitalism, materialism and consumerism, seen as prime causes of our unsustainable lifestyles.

People's perceptions of development issues are deeply influenced by the western political ideology of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). In this worldview the rights of the individual and the attainment of human happiness are seen as supreme goals, based on the assumption that the individual is essentially rational and knows his/her own best interests. The key belief for neoliberals is that of 'economic rationality', that everyone should act to maximize their own personal benefits, i.e. the notion of free enterprise. Private businesses competing against each other should provide the greatest good for all both within and between countries. The World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund) have thus insisted that poorer countries open all aspects of their societies to international competition as the prerequisite for development to occur (Hertz, 2005).

Radicals, however, oppose neoliberal values and see their stress on economic rationality and free market capitalism as one of the main causes of global inequality and debt. The anti-globalisation movement marks a major convergence of radical opposition since it brings together people and organizations focusing on a wide range of issues: environmental damage, human rights issues, debt, poverty, capitalism and the activities of transnational corporations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Hertz, 2001; Klein, 2010). Radicals don't want to just tinker with the system but to fundamentally change it for the better (McKibben, 2009; New Economics Foundation, 2012). Amongst other important works challenging the 'Business as usual' future of neoliberalism (see Session 4: Education and Ideology) are those setting out a new economics for a finite planet (Boyle & Simms, 2009; Jackson, 2009).

2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The 1992 Earth Summit

Put at its simplest any human activity is sustainable if it can continue fairly indefinitely without causing harm to people or planet. Any activity which causes harm to people or planet is the opposite – unsustainable. At the Earth Summit in 1992, held in Rio de Janeiro, world leaders agreed that human activity was seriously damaging the environment and that issues of development, i.e. global wealth/poverty, were seriously damaging people's life chances in both poor and rich countries. The welfare of people and planet, issues of environment and development, are thus now seen as inextricably related, two sides of the same coin. The term sustainable development emerged as shorthand to embrace these twin concerns. Twenty years on the 2012 Earth Summit will continue to emphasise the urgent need for continuing action and change (www.earthsummit2012.org).

Contested meanings

It is important to remember that the notion of sustainability can only be seen in relation to its counterpart of unsustainability. They are also two sides of a coin, but a complex one because, as Davison (2001) points out in *Technology and Contested Meanings of Sustainability*, our unsustainable western lifestyle arises out of the industrial revolution and its subsequent technologies that have led to what we call 'progress' for the few.

The triumphant history of industrialization is shadowed by a history of social oppression and ecological degradation. The vast, unprecedented affluence that has concentrated in highly technological societies is shadowed by poverty and pollution, the extent of which is also vast and unprecedented. This is so because much of our technology persistently lacks the ability to sustain ecological flourishing and social well-being.

The technocentric view believes economic growth should go on as normal but in a more sustainable way, i.e. the notion of sustainable growth. It does not involve radical rethinking of Western lifestyles. The ecocentric worldview sees social, economic and environmental goals as being of equal importance. Only this, radicals argue, will lead to truly sustainable development. Notions of technocratic sustainability derive directly from the neoliberal agenda and represent a Northern view of sustainability.

The Earth Summit also highlighted major North-South tensions since the rich and poor countries of the world often see problems and solutions in quite different terms. Rich Northern governments wanted the poorer South to be responsible stewards of the Earth. Southern governments wanted the North to help them eradicate poverty. To the poorer countries of the South 'caring for the environment' can seem a luxury. The South saw neo-colonialism and the strategies of the IMF and World Bank as largely responsible for unsustainable development and resented Northern demands that they shouldn't exploit their own natural resources for their own benefit.

The best known definition of sustainable development comes from the World Commission on Environment and Development's Brundtland Report (1987): 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' Radicals point out that neo-liberal models of development narrowly focus on economic growth as a measure of progress and discount other costs. Thus actually: i) some people benefit at the expense of others; ii) people benefit at the expense of the environment; iii) people today benefit at the expense of future generations. This is patently unsustainable. An alternative definition of sustainability might therefore emphasise: i) *human well-being*: increased levels of social and economic well-being for all, especially the least advantaged; ii) *environmental value*: increased emphasis on the need to protect the biosphere on which all life depends; iii) *future generations*: who should inherit at least as much wealth, natural and human, as we ourselves inherited.

3. A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

A feasible possible future

Meadows et al. (2005) argue that a sustainable society *is* technically and economically feasible, but only if growth in material consumption and population are eased down and there is a drastic increase in the efficiency of our use of materials and energy.

A sustainable society would be interested in qualitative development, not physical expansion. It would use material growth as a considered tool, not as a perpetual mandate ... Before a sustainable society would decide on any specific growth proposal, it would ask what the growth is for, and who would benefit, and what it would cost, and how long it would last, and whether it could be accommodated by the sources and sinks of the earth.

Such a move, they point out, would be comparable in scale and impact to the Agricultural Revolution of late Neolithic and the Industrial Revolution of the 18-19th centuries. Whilst these revolutions were gradual and spontaneous, a sustainability revolution would have to be a fully conscious operation, an undertaking unique in human history (Hopkins, 2008, 2011; McKibben, 2010).

Some key characteristics

The fact that the notion of sustainable development is contested terrain does not mean we should fail to act in ways that we construe to be more rather than less sustainable. It is entirely possible to sketch out some of the key features of a more sustainable society (CAT, 2010) and these can be explored in different ways by pupils in school.

- **Energy** - Continued reliance on fossil fuels will cause further climate change, whilst the waste from nuclear power stations bequeaths an environmental liability to future generations. A sustainable future will emphasise a mix of energy sources including greatly increased energy efficiency and use of renewable energy resources such as solar, wind, water and biomass.
- **Transport** - Unrestricted use of the car has created a major series of related problems from severe traffic congestion and dangerous air pollution to urban sprawl. A sustainable future will minimise the need for people to travel, with jobs being closer to home, and emphasise use of public transport, buses, trams and cycling.
- **Environment** - Unrestrained consumption of the earth's resources is producing irreversible damage to the biosphere and a major loss of biodiversity. In a sustainable future people will see themselves as a part of nature rather than separate and environmental conservation will be as important as economic growth.
- **Economics** - Traditional models of development focus narrowly on economic growth as the indicator of 'progress'. Various costs are 'discounted' e.g. environmental damage, the impact on the poor, the effect on future generations. A sustainable society will use much more comprehensive indicators of social and environmental well-being.
- **Cities** - Uncontrollable urban growth is having a profound impact on human and planetary health. In a sustainable future planning will be more participatory and land-use and transport policies carefully integrated. Homes, jobs, services and amenities will be mixed together and thus more easily accessible to each other.
- **Poverty** - Debt and falling export prices encourage unsustainable development. A sustainable future for all requires major change of direction in policies and lifestyles of the North towards greater equity and justice for all.
- **Resources** - In a sustainable future waste reduction will replace rubbish disposal. Planned obsolescence, convenience, and the throwaway society will be seen as an aberration. Manufacturing will become less energy intensive and less polluting.
- **Farming** - Current intensive farming often leads to extensive land degradation and a massive effort is needed to protect soil and conserve water. In a sustainable future more emphasis will be put on organic husbandry and mixed farming with biological pest

controls. More food will be grown and consumed locally and regionally.

This session has highlighted the critical importance of environmental and development issues and the need to work towards a more sustainable future. The contested nature of unsustainability/sustainability and sustainable development has been highlighted and related to differing political ideologies or worldviews.

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Meadows, D. et al. (2005) *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year update*, London: Earthscan

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Whether you are reading this for your own interest, sharing this material with others or using it as an aid to your teaching this session raises questions about the nature of a more sustainable future. After checking 'Discussion skills in groups' jot down your response to the following questions:

1. How do you respond to the need to work towards a more sustainable future?
2. What do you see as some of the possibilities and implications for education?

After discussing each question (it is useful to agree in advance how long to spend on each) list on a flipchart the main responses arising in the group. What similarities are there, what differences? What might be the possible origins of these? What further reading might be useful?