

The Great Debate: Development, Sustainability and Environment

Sponsored by Peer Review for Urban Sustainable Development
 Convened by Caspar Hewett, Dave O'Toole, Jon Bryan and Mo Lovatt

Proceedings based on the notes of John Theaker, edited by Caspar Hewett

In the last twenty years environmental thinking has become very much a part of our every day lives. The term 'sustainable development' has entered the mainstream and is used to guide policy in both the developed and developing world. Yet whilst we in the West enjoy a safe, clean, pleasant environment coupled with high living standards the developing world is being discouraged from aspiring to anything more than basic needs. So what is sustainable development and what are its consequences? What is current in environmental thought?

This one day conference re-evaluated the relevance of environmentalism in the 21st century, examining the intimate links between the concepts of development, sustainability and environmentalism and asking if development to western standards is possible for the developing world.

An audience of 50 people dragged themselves out of bed on a Saturday morning in late September 2003 to hear the arguments and have their say. I hope they felt it was worth it . . .

Session 1: Environmental Ideas in the 21st Century

The Chair, **Dave O'Toole**, framed the discussion by pointing at how environmental ideas now cut across all areas of politics, business and civil society and asking what impact these ideas are having; Environmental ideas are now taught in schools, discussed in the House of Commons and debated at world summits, so what does it mean to be an environmentalist in the 21st Century? He introduced the three speakers; **Derek Bell**, Leverhulme Research Fellow in Politics at University of Newcastle, **Joe Kaplinsky**, Technology Analyst and **Mary Mellor**, author *The Politics of Money: Towards Sustainability and Economic Democracy* and asked them to consider the impact of the environmental movement, what is behind the mainstreaming of environmental ideas and what consequences this has for the future

Derek Bell opened by saying that the problem for environmentalists at the start of the 21st Century is that environmental ideas have become part of the mainstream and have lost their radical political and economic edge. The principle of sustainability is widely accepted. For governments and businesses that buy into it there is an attitude of win-win. There is no notion of trade offs. The idea of environmentalism has become part of the mainstream and weakened as a result. He outlined what he sees as the ideas inherent in sustainable development;

- **Justice.** The Brundtland report defined sustainable development as 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' Justice is a very important element in this.
- **Public participation** is also very important. Emphasis is placed on public participation. However, often this is only a formal commitment - paying lip service to participation. We need to go beyond the "same old faces" syndrome. How do we encourage people to get more involved in decision-making? What innovations can encourage people to participate? One way forward here is the concept of environmental citizenship.

Bell argued that we need a new paradigm of social and hard science - to move away from the technological fix - for there are important social and political aspects to environmentalism as well. An inter-disciplinary approach is needed. In a world dominated by money and power it is important for environmentalists to find ways to participate and to engage in dialogue on these issues.

The second speaker, Joe Kaplinsky, felt that environmental ideas have been a disaster so far - we don't need them. He asked; what is at the core of environmental ideas and what are the common themes? Using a quote by George Monbiot as an example, Kaplinsky argued that, underlying environmental ideas is the sense that, contained within our aspirations are the seeds of our own destruction. It is the idea of 'nature's revenge' - Monbiot

says that our 'dreaming' will destroy the conditions for life on Earth.

For Kaplinsky environmental ideas represent a profound scepticism towards science and technology. The environmentalists claim that we have made science a god. The solutions are often drastic. For example it is suggested that we need to cut our energy use to 10-20% of present levels and that draconian regulation needs to be introduced. However, these ideas are not informed by a series of evidence and disasters. Rather they represent two things; a reaction against progress and a politics of fear. The precautionary principle is intimately linked to these two things. It places emphasis on unknown effects at an indeterminate time in the future - it is all speculation and is not based on the present situation. More often than not it projects disaster onto the future.

Kaplinsky asked why we should minimise impact, our 'footprint.' Impact is often referred to but is rarely defined - Paul Erlich defined it in a very general way which seems to see any impact of human activity as bad. The logic of Erlich's argument is that we should regress to the stone age.

In closing his introduction Kaplinsky pointed out that, while it is tempting to see these trends as being unique to the European Union, in fact the politics of fear is world wide. For example the US is experiencing something similar but there it is most clearly manifested as a fear of international terrorism and of muslim fundamentalism.

Mary Mellor argued that the economy is the biggest thing we have to contend with and made a passionate attack on money. She drew attention to the defeat of the left in the 1980s and the vacuum this left in politics; while the greens have developed views about the economy they tend to underemphasise the importance of money - We need to go to the heart of how the economy really works. The economic system is a money-based system. However, money is not real. It is presented as real but it conceals the true value of things. After all a house is just a house regardless of its 'value' in money terms. Mellor feels that we have lost any sense of what is valuable.

Mellor argued that money only recognises what it wants to recognise and that it confers power. She asked what right have they got? The most important aspect of the modern economy is that it presents itself as a wealth creating sector - but the modern economy is a money making sector, not a wealth creating sector. 97% of the money in our economy is circulated through debt, mainly through consumer and housing debt. She asked; shouldn't we collectively harness that money and use it for things that are valuable, that we want to? There is nothing natural about the economy. We know the price of everything and the value of nothing. Mellor closed by arguing that we should collectively take control of the way money is issued. If we grasp this politically and socially then there will be a revolution.

During the feedback session Kaplinsky pointed to the explosion of financial activity in derivatives and insurance driven by risk aversion. This current obsession with minimising risk is another consequence of the influence of green thought and provides a further illustration of the politics of fear and precaution. Kaplinsky also drew attention the stigmatization of industrialization which he sees as a barely concealed critique of production.

On the question of democracy Mary Mellor argued that only with economic democracy can democracy have any strength or meaning. Derek Bell defined democracy as rule by the people for the people and pointed to representative, participatory and deliberative democracy as essential forms, each being part of a whole. He felt that an emphasis on democracy is essential - so many of the decisions made in our society are undemocratic. We need to look at the democratisation of science so that the specialists do not run away with the world and it is incumbent on scientists to bridge the gap. For Joe Kaplinsky what democracy requires is the formation of some kind of expression of the general will, the collective decision. He argued that environmentalism denies the old way of rational discourse and debate, that too much of the irrationality of environmentalism is given too much respect and that there is too much emotion injected into the discussion. Thus he defended rationality itself.

Session 2: Sustainability Here and Now

The Chair, *Viv Regan*, opened the session by pointing to the way work has been undertaken at international, national and local levels to advance sustainable urban development over the last decade. She then introduced the two speakers for this head-to-head discussion on the benefits or otherwise of the sustainability paradigm in the context of the developed world; **Allen Creedy**, Project Director, Peer Review for European Sustainable Urban Development (PRESUD), Directorate of Enterprise, Environment & Culture, Newcastle City Council and **James Heartfield**, editor *Sustaining Architecture in the Anti-Machine Age* and author *The 'Death of the Subject' Explained* and *Need and Desire in the Postmaterial Economy*.

Allen Creedy opened with a presentation on the PRESUD project. PRESUD is a three year project aimed at developing and testing a peer review tool that will undertake a performance assessment of sustainable development in nine European Cities. Performance Assessment is being used by the cities to develop and implement an action plan. The action plan will improve the sustainable development performance of the city by putting in place new policies and by delivering new activities.

The objectives of the project are to elaborate on the OECD peer review methodology, pilot a peer review tool in the partner cities over three years and implement a SMART – action plans to achieve improved sustainable development performance.

What are the issues? All areas – air water waste natural resource etc... social and economic integration – energy – transport – regional co-operation – environmental and social integration. The project has taken benchmarks from www.idea.org.uk/Igip and tested them at EU level.

Results: Nine Reports have been produced. Thirty five politicians and technical experts have been involved; the review teams are made up of these. High level EU wide dissemination is taking place and there is OECD support for this project. The project is attempting to challenge existing approaches to sustainable development; all cities are implementing change and PRESUD is contributing to understanding better how culture effects sustainable development.

In closing Allen Creedy pointed out that in Newcastle there is no one responsible for sustainable development, there is no cohesion of policy and there is poor public consultation and participation. As a result Newcastle City Council has set up an environmental partnership; this provides the audience with a chance to get involved along with other stakeholder groups. The second review is taking place on 2nd – 6th Feb 2004 and the people present were encouraged to join the debate.

James Heartfield sees us as the first post-scarcity generation and began by asking why we are still clinging to scarcity. Having studied for a long time the concept of sustainability he has concluded that it has no precise meaning, only a vague intellectual framework for operating and developing policy. What is brought to mind is the concept of scarcity itself. In 1943 a report was issued about scurvy; "our rationing system is failing - our citizens are coming down with scurvy." The civil service was very unsympathetic – they argued that people were much healthier since rationing was introduced (although they did say that some people in supervisory grades were suffering from strain!). Heartfield pointed to the fact that those who lived through the post Second World War period experienced real material want. This affected every aspect of their lives and their way of looking at material things – they were, and had to be, a scarcity minded generation.

In contrast it should be great for us, the first post-scarcity generation. There should be parties celebrating an end to scarcity but in fact it makes us fantastically anxious. The fact that there is food in the shops means that you have to buy it all. This makes some people feel insecure and like children some fail to eat responsibly which has led to the obesity situation. There are no material limits to our immediate consumption needs – in the late 1970s it was oil that we thought would disappear. However we now know that there are greater oil reserves today than there were in the 1970s. Already we are developing the technologies beyond oil use – every time we have met an obstacle we have overcome it. In the South East of England there is land scarcity and in Britain as a whole there is a scarcity of houses. Why? Because there has been a reluctance to build and so the houses that are needed have not been built! So why not build some houses? Contrary to popular assumption there is more and more land available every year, mainly because modern agriculture does not require much land. There is also more forested land in Europe and the USA now than there was a century ago.

So, James Heartfield asked, why are we afraid of superfluity? One reason is that there is always a “milk monitor” – someone controlling the distribution of things and these people don’t like abundance. For Heartfield it is informed by existential fear; superfluity is something we are coming to terms with and instinctively we imagine barriers to replace the physical limitations on our abilities.

Allen Creedy picked up on Heartfield’s point about a lack of housing in the South East. In the North East we have more housing than we need. Why not encourage people to move north? Creedy went on to point out that in the majority of the world there is enormous scarcity – maybe if we took a broader view than our own narrow view we would recognise this.

James Heartfield expressed a small fear that any regeneration development framework has an overarching theme. He had no doubt that PRESUD will result in great developments and did not want to knock what they are trying to achieve, but if the big theme is a kind of guilty nervous sentiment then that is a problem. Giving some examples of recent positive developments Heartfield cited China, who are racing ahead, and pointed out that life expectancy in the UK is climbing. If you go to India and China those people are living longer and longer too. What is more we are generally producing more than we consume. Korea is now twelfth place among developed countries; this is a country that used to be seen as poor. Heartfield does not think we should go around beating ourselves up – it is good that the West is booming.

Allen Creedy argued for a principle that tries to find ways of continuing our growth that does not produce wastes and does not use up non-renewable resources – if we can move towards eco-efficiency then maybe we can continue our growth. He argued that we need to be humble.

Asked from the floor whether there is a conflict between choice and sustainable development, Creedy said that we all have a choice but it depends on how we are looking at things; are we being inward looking or are we concerned with our fellow man? If it is that latter then we do not have a choice. Heartfield thought that the actual choices the market mechanism presents are mind-numbingly boring. It presents a kind of fake choice which has reduced choice to a terribly banal level which has led to us losing the sense that we can make decisions more broadly.

Creedy stated that 40% of all road haulage is food and said that if we want to reduce congestion we should buy local and not use supermarkets. In contrast Heartfield sees this as a superb achievement that we do not have to eat locally – it represents an amazing advance related to the economies of scale and division of labour in the world today. For Heartfield, although it is true that along rapid economic growth comes great disparity in wealth, if you have more over all, then this tends to lift the standard of living of every sector of society, even the poorest. In fact, perceptions of wealth are all relative; What we call poor now would be seen as great wealth 100 years ago; Today, more than 50% of young people think that having a mobile phone is essential. Their values are different and the floor of needs rises.

Creedy gave the example of Earth Balance as the sort of positive approach that can be taken. Earth Balance is a project in Northumberland set up to help to restore the natural balance between people and the environment. Based on the concepts of regeneration, sustainability and community empowerment, the main projects were related to organic farming, renewable energy generation and the encouragement of small businesses which would function in a sustainable manner. Creedy saw this and projects like it as giving us a choice by helping/enabling us to support the local economy.

In his final comments, Allen Creedy described Heartfield as a bit of a rascal. He argued that we have to subscribe to a system to survive and that we must take account of scarcity. We may be currency privileged, but we have few skills, have no subsistence and are highly vulnerable; if the system fails we are in very big trouble.

James Heartfield proposed that we can better provide for future generations by providing more – what is it that we think that future generations will be short of? Shouldn’t we aim to provide those things? While it is true that the whole of human society is less than 49 days away from starvation this is only because we choose to create the means of existence through agriculture – We ARE dependant on other people, but that is a good thing according to Heartfield. However this can create great existential fear in times of conflict; people are concerned that if the distribution network failed we would all starve. For Heartfield the idea that the developing world feeds the developed world is an oversimplification of reality; Europe and USA are belching out food surpluses and this is one of the great examples of post scarcity. In his closing remarks he bemoaned the way the benefits of this

society that DO exist are all too often ignored – the very real things that make our lives easier represent great achievements of humanity. Not only that, we may want to leave a very dainty footprint, but in actuality we want our cars and televisions - we love stuff!

Session 3: What Future for the Developing World?

The Chair, **Mo Lovatt**, opened by reminding the audience of the definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Report as 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' She introduced the three speakers; **Ceri Dingle**, Director of the development charity WORLDwrite, **Geoff Parkin**, Lecturer in Sustainable Hydrology, Water Resource Systems Research Laboratory (WRSRL) and **Jan Simmonds**, Christian Aid North East and asked them; Where does of sustainable development leave present generations? What can the developing world realistically aspire to?

Ceri Dingle began by asking whether sustainable development is the way forward for the developing world. She asked for a show of hands from the audience on whether they thought that people of the developing world should have all the same opportunities as we have to which a large majority agreed that they should. She then asked; What if people in the developing world want things that some people in the West don't like such as motorways and roads, highly mechanised agriculture, chemical fertilisers, genetically modified crops, industrialisation, multi-nationals, fertility treatment, nuclear power, sky scrapers, MacDonalds, Coca Cola, big hotels, airports and Play Station.

Development in the West means that we have a great deal of freedom and have all the material benefits of modern life. The problem Dingle has with sustainable development is that it does not say that the developing world can have the same. Sustainable development is an argument for restraint and compromise in order to preserve the environment – this underlying assumption is not questioned generally, even by critics of the idea of sustainability. Dingle thus characterises the discussion as "Sustainablebabbled" – Her main objections are that sustainable development;

- prioritises nature over human beings
- exaggerates environmental problems
- romanticises nature
- advocates technology for the developing world we wouldn't accept
- denies aspirations
- advocates low expectations
- assumes people from developing world are unlike us
- ties people to the land and subsistence life styles
- does not think people want, can or should have what we have
- allows the richer countries to have a monopoly on manufacturing.
- holds back investment
- holds back scientific advances
- stops major infrastructure projects
- blames the poor for environmental degradation
- blames developing countries for problems
- suggests we should consume less rather than produce more
- suggests there are too many people in the world
- ensures the status quo for the developing world
- is not about making people in the developing world rich
- is not about serious development and has nothing to do with global equality

Ceri Dingle thinks there is an implicit assumption in the discussions around sustainable development that people from the developing world are different from us. This used to be called racism. In fact, according to Dingle, people in the Amazon want what we have – they want roads and running water and trainers. Many proponents of sustainable development romanticise nature and the way people in the developing world live; some NGOs claim that they do not want what we have, but this is counter to Dingle's experience as director of WORLDwrite; people in developing countries generally aspire to living standards comparable to those in the West. She argued that if you are serious about global equality then you must ditch any concept that says they cannot have what we have.

One of the latest things, which Dingle finds appalling, is the promotion of Sustainable Livelihoods by the Department for International Development (DfID). The argument is that this is important because progress in poverty reduction should be lasting rather than fleeting, but this obscures the fact that they are prioritising the environment over people. As an example of how low their aspiration are, DfID aims to halve the number of people that live on less than a dollar a day over the next 10 years.

The second speaker, Geoff Parkin of Newcastle University, is currently working in Middle East water resources projects. He was glad to see the discussion moving towards the international arena. The SUSMAQ (Sustainable Management Of The West Bank And Gaza Aquifers) project deals with the aquifers on the boundaries of Palestine and Israel and has identified three measures for assessing successful water resource management – environmental, social and economic. Parkin thinks that there is too much emphasis on gross domestic product (GDP) – this is promoted by politicians and the media. While there have been attempts to introduce other indicators, they don't get any common currency for the developed and developing world. He argued for a need to come up with new ideas about growth that take into account social and environmental aspects – we need a transparent way to look at global well-being so that we can have proper arguments about progress. Parkin would like to get away from the idea that 'stuff' is all that matters – a list of material gains. The SUSMAQ project is looking not only at the amount of water in the ground but also at social indicators such as the amount of the population connected to networks, the ratio of wealth, to make sure there is equity in the social field. When trying to make some assessment of sustainable development it is important to look beyond individual countries and look at what effect any measures taken have on other people and countries. One of the key aspects of water is what effect it has on agriculture. Account also needs to be taken of the fact that water moves around the world - for example in the Israel-Palestine situation water has been diverted from the Palestinian people for irrigation of Israeli crops. Thus sustainability cannot be considered in isolation.

Geoff Parkin ended by pointing out that our current situation in the UK was built upon exploitation of natural resources in the colonial period – but now we are exploiting human labour around the world and basing our wealth on this. Economy and power are always linked together and the equity of distribution depends on power at all levels. Some of Parkin's work has shown that water distribution does not lead to equitable development – it depends at the end of the day on political power.

The final speaker, Jan Simmonds, was part of the team which set up Traidcraft and was Personnel Director for many years before managing the Traidcraft Exchange assistance programme for fair trade businesses in India and Bangladesh. She also set up International Resources for fairer trade, an NGO helping small businesses in western India. She joined Christian Aid in 1997 to manage the organisation's fundraising, campaigning and awareness raising in the North East and is a director of Shared Interest, the fair trade investment society.

Simmonds pointed out that the developing world is a big place inhabited by 5 billion people and that it would be very hard to reach consensus about what these people want. She thus decided to focus on a particular country for her introduction; Bangladesh. Bangladesh is largely an agricultural economy with people living pretty much as they did 1000 or even 2000 years ago. However, unlike the people of the past, people in Bangladesh today know about the West and they are no longer content with the world they have. However, it is difficult to see how Bangladesh can achieve this development without destruction. There are some examples where the government have taken positive steps. For example plastic bags are banned in the capital, Dhaka, and public transport is good. It is, however, difficult to see how they can develop great wealth without at least our co-operation – the trade rules need to be very much more favourable. In the 1970s Bangladesh was exempted from certain restrictions on trade such as the multi-fibre arrangement; This exemption has changed lives and led to the development of a whole industry. You could argue that this has done more for women than any other measure including the work of Christian Aid. Simmonds drew attention to research into the thousand or so varieties of rice that grow in Bangladesh in search of the heartiest strains. She argued that funds currently being spent on research into genetic modification of crops could be better spent on this type of research.

According to Jan Simmonds, Bangladesh needs the West to stop clattering around the world being anti-Islamic; Muslim fundamentalism is growing in the villages and several of Christian Aid partners have reported problems with the women's program as a consequence. This is particularly problematic since Christian Aid's experience is that if you help women to develop then this has enormous impact on children and the future. Bangladesh boundaries were set up arbitrarily by colonial powers and its people have problems understanding why these boundaries should exist. These are artificial boundaries set in earlier days. If any of the predictions on global warming are true a large proportion of Bangladesh will disappear under water and these people will need

somewhere else to live. Christian Aid wants to challenge the scandal of poverty. She closed by stating that it is not the life of the poor but the life of the rich that is unsustainable.

In the discussion, Ceri Dingle stated that the problem with the fair trade discussion is that it does not address the lack of productivity in the developing world; unless you deal with the productivity issue you would expect the poor farmers to continue to operate on a low level of subsistence, gaining no wealth or freedom.

On the water question Dingle wondered why people worry about water scarcity when we have the technology to desalinate. Desalination may be expensive, but surely it could solve the water shortage problem in many countries. Geoff Parkin outlined two key proposals for sorting out the water situation in Israel and Palestine; A desalination plant is under design but its completion will mean that the Israelis would be in a position to sell water to the Palestinians. This highlights the question of who has the power over resources; at present the World Trade Organisation (WTO) is controlling the resources and the way in which trade is being run. The Palestinians are not in a position to create internal wealth. It is amazing that the US and the West are not really tackling this as it is causing so many problems around the world; the essential problem is the political situation.

John Gowing of Newcastle University took issue with Ceri Dingle's view of sustainability. He highlighted the way the Brundtland commission in 1987 dealt with the issue of development versus sustainable development and a consensus was reached. In 1992 around a hundred nations gathered at the summit in Rio de Janeiro and agreed, and bought into, sustainable development. He asked if Dingle really believes that a hundred nations knowingly agreed to something that is disadvantageous to them. Dingle saw this reading of events as erroneous; Developing countries bought into the Rio summit on the back of the promise of aid, much of which never materialised. By the time the Johannesburg summit of 2002 took place the view in the developing world had changed to one of suspicion of false promises.

On the question of global warming the panel were agreed that it is fairly certain that it is taking place. However, there is a question regarding its causes, in particular how much of contribution human activity makes to it. Some scientists claim that we contribute only 10% to the effect. It is a problem but we need to focus our efforts on the problems we really can do something about. Ceri Dingle asked why we cannot protect Bangladesh from floods if we can *create* Holland.