

SUSTAINABILITY AND POVERTY

Pursuing the goals of sustainability, and pursuing them rigorously and with good intent, seems often to fall short; the desired results of definitively reducing energy consumption and CO₂ output often appear beyond reach or give confused outcomes.

One reason for this is that the goals themselves are usually plural, multi-purposed and often conflicting. And so arguments, often heated, can develop between those who support the same aim. An example of this from the built environment is the debate between creating housing with a thermal sink of heavy concrete and masonry construction, and housing that is of lightweight construction. Thermal sinks activate a time lag in the day/night cooling cycle and lightweight materials are quickly cooled by cross-ventilation. In simple terms, ‘cave’ vs ‘tent’ living. Some of Harry Seidler’s houses showcase the former and Glen Murcutt’s classic rural retreats describe the latter. Which is correct for a particular climate? Is there a suitable compromise? Can a building design benefit from bits of both?

Another example of conflict within the environmental movement is the warfare waged by some of the more extreme groups, where shades of green are reviled and only squeaky-green combat applauded. And, of course, the various emission and carbon trading schemes provide multiple positions for entrenched political and corporate posturing.

This brief essay suggests that there is a unifying idea that can form the basis of a more solid footing for the various points of departure on the way to a more sustainable future.

But before considering that, there is one glaring fact, one extremely large elephant in the room, which is fundamental to any discussion on sustainability. And that is Third-World extreme poverty..... and second and first world poverty also (for those of us who like to observe things closer to home) because in Australia, Europe and especially the USA, there is significant poverty.

Are these two issues – sustainability and poverty – distinct and separate? Can they be ‘solved’ individually? One first and then, proudly dusting off one’s hands, the other? If so, which one first? Or as people of goodwill, do we try to sort out both problems at the same time, and with the same bucket of money?

Perhaps we should be asking: “are sustainability and poverty, in fact, problems of the same nature, which can both be addressed by a similar philosophy and attitude?”

Is there a uniting driver for the divergent goals within sustainability that will simultaneously allow a focus on extreme poverty reduction? This essay suggests that

there is and that driver, that point of reference, is encompassed simply by the one word: sharing.

Ecologically, and when we are at our best, we do wish to share nature and the cornucopia of all the numerous species of the planet with our kids and our grandkids; to share our mineral wealth with future generations and not just pillage the earth for our own enrichment; and of course we are realising very quickly that we have to stop using the atmosphere as a waste dump for CO₂.

But extreme poverty, in spite of the dire news and images that we see almost nightly on our TVs, does not seem to move us.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Report (2003) states that 68,000 people *per day* die of malnutrition. Is this not shocking? Or is it not even more shocking that we are not shocked? How long can we maintain this separation from, and lack of care for, those so demonstrably less well-off? Here in first world countries, we tell ourselves that we must be good global citizens, we must become more sustainable and start cleaning up our pollution and garbage. Though of course we seem to want to do this only if we can do so without giving up anything ourselves. The typical green attitude, even from some responsible environmental leaders, seems to be: “how can I make my *current* life-style greener?”

Is it because the dire poverty that we see on TV does not, obviously, consume resources and create pollution that we are not outraged? Is it only when countries such as China and India endeavour to lift the squalid poverty of a couple of hundred million of their peoples, obviously causing more consumption and pollution and adding to global warming, that we begin to take notice?

There is much hypocrisy between first-world green initiatives and third world hunger. So what is the solution? What does sharing mean?

This is what sharing doesn't mean: There is a place where you can stand in one of Sydney's very exclusive suburbs and see several generations of additions to the rear of west (and harbour-view) facing houses. This is a historical record of closed-in balconies, new balconies subsequently closed-in again with further pergolas and terraces – all straining to get a better view and look past the neighbours. It's like jungle plants fighting for the sunlight of the Harbour Bridge and Opera House. However, the most selfish displays are those objections lodged by neighbours because they did not want to share their view with an adjacent DA applicant. No matter that their own view may not be affected, they have something – *their* view - and they wish to keep it for their privileged selves.

Families don't work like this; most parents give and give to children; it is instinctive behaviour, and it is motivated by love. Outside families, however, it is often war. Dog eat dog. Competition, free enterprise, survival of the fittest. Does it always have to be this way?

Global Footprint Network states that humanity currently uses the equivalent of 1.3 Earths to provide the resources that we use and absorb our wastes. Moderate UN scenarios suggest that if current population and consumption trends continue, by the mid 2030's we will need the equivalent of two Earths to support us. Though of course, we only have one. It is obvious that we, in the first world, are using more than our fair share. Could we really contemplate using *only* our share; what if we could reduce our consumption and waste by almost half? Obviously this would entail a changed, more moderated lifestyle, and not the continuation of a greater and greater satisfying of invented needs.

Baby-boomers fondly remember the late 60s and early 70s as a time of free love and peace, man. Then, there was a prevailing sense of sharing and a free giving: not just of love and sex, but of all one had. If you had only two apples, you gave one to the stranger next to you, and you wouldn't go hungry because another stranger would offer you a carrot, or a peach... or maybe a joint. But the overriding aspect of the hippy era was of sharing. This didn't last long – perhaps only a few years, but in that time hope was tangible, possibilities were endless, fear and anxiety seemed remote. Maybe it was just youthful fancies or maybe for those few years we were really onto something. Something worthwhile and meaningful.

Sharing would mean being less possessive and less greedy. It would mean loosening up on that fierce competitive drive that currently animates most of our business, sporting and even recreational activities. It would mean less of 'them' and more of 'us'; it would mean we would expand to an ever larger family.

Michael Burling is an old Sydney baby-boomer. In his article on 'Sharing and Being Shared' he states:

“I am now a very wealthy man, in fact, fabulously wealthy. I have a holiday house on the south coast and from my rear door I can stroll straight onto my own beach. I walk through my soft sand; I dive through my translucently clear water; I see my reeds and my fish, my very own rocky reef. I raise my eyes and see my sea extending to the horizon; I see my sky, my clouds. To the right and left the beach extends for miles, others are there. I share it freely with them. And perhaps some of them are sharing it with me.”

And if we could all share the one God (worshipping in whatever way that we humans have developed and without the grasping attitude of exclusive ownership) then there would be no tectonic clashes along faith lines. No more faith-based wars!

Perhaps this is starting to sound like a yearning for utopia, and certainly (given the human condition) that would be unobtainable; or perhaps it is sounding like just another term for communism – which is a kind of forced sharing. Maybe a better description of this concept would be: 'voluntary sharing'. That is, a sharing that springs from an individual's personal desire, rather than a sharing enforced by legislation or punishment. This would seem to be a more preferable approach because one can embark on this now, without approval or support of others. One can begin sharing very simple things such as freely sharing the road with others without the usual aggressive manoeuvres and

derogative commentary; shopping for gifts at Oxfam (which buys from ethical third-world enterprises) and undertaking all those well-known initiatives to save power, water, energy, resources.

Peter Singer, the Australian bio-ethicist, tells us that if one were to forego the morning take-away coffee and give that money to an Aid Agency, one third-world child's life would be saved every three months. And surely much more can be given up and many more lives saved.

Maybe this won't lead to a sea change in society; maybe no-one else will take the least notice, but I will know that I, at least, am beginning to contribute. And perhaps now, through this notion of voluntary sharing, I can find a place from which my personal, social, charitable and business decisions can spring more naturally, more easily and more meaningfully. If, at its root, *sharing* is sought rather than *grasping*, then possibilities and potentialities for both sustainability and relief from extreme poverty may begin to grow and flourish.