

## SUSTAINABILITY

The word sustainability has come to mean many things to many people. To talk about Sustainable Communities requires a beginning discussion of sustainability.

### Defining Sustainability

We can look at the word sustainability in two forms: sustainability and/or the ability to sustain. To sustain is not just to keep going, because we are not machines. Sustainability is about the ability to keep going in a way that allows us to be the full human beings and the full human communities and societies that are possible. We are not talking about exist-ability. We're talking about sustainability. The word reflects the integral nature of the way human beings and all the other organisms that inhabit the earth, and the resources of the earth and come together to create a dynamic whole.

The best way to explain why we need to understand sustainability is to use the famous quote from Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." In some parts of the world, in some families, these are the best of times. Yet at the same time, in many other parts of the world, in many other families, these are, if not the worst of times, very difficult times.

The world in which we live today is the result of the actions of the men and women, the families, the societies, cultures and countries that have lived throughout the past centuries. What they did and how they did it provides the possibilities of the present. In turn, what we do today, and how we do what we do, and with whom we do it creates the hope of possibility for the future.

The key question for understanding is

*"What type of world do we want to create for the future and what is required for that creation to be possible ?*

And then as we ask that basic question, we must also ask ourselves:

*"For whom do we want that type of world?"*

Every time we use the word "we", we have to ask ourselves who are we including and why.

Even as we begin to answer these questions, we have to realize that we have to ask them over and over again. As we examine situations in particular families, in particular communities and in particular countries, we begin to realize that there are no generalizations that apply to everybody, no generalizations that apply to all families, all communities, or certainly no generalizations that apply to all countries.

How we understand the world in which we live today depends on who we are, what part of a country we live in, what family we were born into, our gender, our class, our education, and many other factors.

The challenge that is going to continually face us as we examine what is needed for sustainable communities, whenever we speak, whenever we write, is:

*Who are we including in our "we"? And then the flip side of this: Who are we leaving out?*

### Suggestion for your own study: Who is your “we”?

Sit quietly and reflect on your use of the word “we”. Reflect on your use of the word in everyday life, at work, in your studies, etc. Try to be aware of the different ways in which you use the word, you hear the word used, and what is implied at different times.

Then ask yourself the following questions:

What is the smallest “we” that you thought of? Who was/ is included?

What is the largest or most encompassing “we”? What was/is included?

Does the use of the term “we” automatically imply a “they?” Why/ why not?

What prevents the expansion of who is included when you use the term “we”?

What encourages the expansion of who is included when you use the term “we”?

Try asking a friend or colleague the same questions and see what the answers are.

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### Key Concept A: The Biosphere

We live, each of us, as a member of the biosphere. We live on Earth, surrounded by air and water, and many other components of what it means to be on Earth. There are two key realities to understanding the biosphere. *The first is that it is limited.* There’s a limited amount of water, a limited amount of air within the biosphere. While the components go through processes where they cycle through and then come back to where they were before, there is still a limited amount of what is there.

*Second, none of the components of the biosphere exist or function in isolation.* When actions are taken that impact a portion of the biosphere or any space, or a substance within the biosphere, there is always a ripple effect, sometimes positive and sometimes negative.

*Third, within the biosphere there is finite space.* The idea that some people have, that there is always a cleaner or better place to go to, is a denial of this limitation.

On all levels, and in all areas of the functioning within the biosphere, there is what we call a dynamic equilibrium, a dynamic give and take, a dynamic flow. It is important to emphasize the world dynamic. It is not static. Static is like two people on a see-saw who weigh the exact same amount. They don’t go up. They don’t go down. They’re just balanced. That’s static. Dynamic is when they begin to ride the seesaw, and they go up, and they go down. They go up and they go down. The ability to do one is related to the ability of the other to do the opposite, and then to change those places. It’s the sense of the dynamic, rather than the static that we need to emphasize.

*There is no action that any of us takes that does not have a reaction or a response from other members or parts of the communities or societies, or environment in which we live.*

If we take a look at natural resources, we could say there is a dynamic equilibrium between use and reuse, for example. It’s the sense of the dynamic and not the static that is necessary core understanding.

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### Key Concept B: Past, Present, and Future

Next in our ability to understand sustainability is awareness that we live in a certain moment of time and that what we are able to do and how we are able to do it is based upon the actions of the past, just as what we do, today, will define possibility for the future. In a sense, this relationship between past, present and future is another dynamic equilibrium, another dynamic give and take. Sustainability is possible only by understanding the actions of the past and acknowledging that some have been

wonderful, some have been good, some have been awful, and some have been beyond awful into devastating or worse...and learning from the effects of these. It is crucial that we recognize that we have to learn from what was not good as well as what was good so that we begin to understand what is possible and beneficial for the future.

In addition to that, we have to look at the damage that was done in the past, and the damage that we are doing today in the present, and to understand that wherever and whenever possible we need to find ways to repair that damage. If not, the damage becomes a negative weight in the dynamic equilibrium of the biosphere.

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### Key Concept C: Benefit Balance

The next foundational concept to understand sustainability is that of benefit balance. Benefit balance demands of us that when we speak about the benefit of any action, of any process, of any historical time or functioning, that we understand that that benefit does not accrue to everyone. Some have received and continue to receive a greater benefit than others. The very idea that there is accumulation of benefit by some in any part of the world requires that we acknowledge that there are others who do not benefit at all. And so this concept of benefit balance demands that we ask ourselves, whenever we are examining any action:

*Who benefits? How do they get the benefits? Who does not get the benefit, and why?*

In a sense, part of what exploring sustainability requires us to realize is that there are many persons, communities, and living elements of the world that have seemed to be invisible to others, particularly invisible to those in a position of dominance. Sustainability thinking helps us learn to see. If we are honest we have to admit that we have not always seen well. Sustainability thinking helps us to see better in the future. There is an urgent need that we speed up our acknowledging and our learning because the truth is that people die, communities die, species die, other communities and persons suffer because of their invisibility before the eyes of those who have power to bring about change.

In the sections that follow, we explore and develop our understanding of environmental sustainability, key to which is the understanding of the concept of the eco-system. In a parallel way, we will be examining the econo-system that creates and controls access to and benefit from resources throughout the world, the economic system. This concept of benefit balance will be key to understanding the eco-system and the econo-system.

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### Key Concept D: Stakes and the Stakeholders

In these sections, the concept of stakeholder will often be used. The term refers to those groups, communities, or entities that have a stake in, or whose lives and functioning are affected by the actions, or possible future actions that are under consideration. In a sense we are saying, "Who benefits from what is being talked about?" Or we are asking, "What is the center of what's important?"

For environmental sustainability, the center is the maintenance and viability of the planet and the eco-systems.

For economic sustainability, the center is the on-going health and balance of the systems controlling the earth's resources.

For humanity, a part of these systems, the center is the ability of the person, family, and community to reach the level of development commensurate with their human dignity, on the local, national and international levels.

To use a contemporary specific example, when a business corporation is allowed to operate in a community, it must see itself as part of a system in which community sustainability is the aim. It is the community that is “at stake”. The corporation is just one of the stakeholders affected by and affecting the sustainability of the community.

### **Suggestions for your own study**

Do a web search for the following: “sustainability+definition.” You will quickly see that there are many different definitions of sustainability.

Which do you think is the best definition? Why?  
Are these definitions complete? If not, what is missing?

### **ANALYSIS LENSES: ACCESS, CONTROL AND BENEFIT**

Building upon these foundational concepts, we will use three lenses through which to examine all the other sections. These lenses are Access, Control and Benefit.

THE LENS OF ACCESS: The following are the questions we will continually ask:

Access to what?  
Access to resources?  
Access to power?  
Access to profit?

THE LENS OF CONTROL: Control exists in a variety of forms.

Who has the power to control?  
Who has the knowledge to control?  
Who has the power, or will, to make the laws and the rules that control?

THE LENS OF BENEFIT: When we speak about benefit, we look at life, at the ability to live fully.

Who has the benefit resulting from income?  
Who has the benefit of control?  
Who has the benefit resulting from power?

In one sense, these seem to be repetitive. But rather than look at them as repetitive, we need to see them as integrated, or rather as a type of weaving together, so that if one thread is pulled, it affects the ability to the rest to function in the way it needs to function. Everything we examine in essay is going to be analyzed through these lenses, and hopefully when you finish, you will find that no matter what you read, no matter what you hear, no matter what ideas you have, you will automatically examine them and assess them through these lenses. Are other lenses possible? Certainly, but for now, these are the lenses we are going to use.

## SUSTAINABILITY - PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

### Understanding Impact

Amid all the language of sustainability, there is a danger of speaking in generalities and not taking the time to access specific actions and their effects on specific communities, persons and countries. It is important to continually do the analysis on three levels:

- Level 1: Impact on persons and families
- Level 2: Impact on communities
- Level 3: Impact on nations or countries

This analysis will be done from three perspectives: past, present and future.

### EXAMPLES OF SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES from the PAST AFFECTING THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

There are numerous sustainability issues or instances of environmental, social or economic impact from the past that continue to the present day. Many of us are members of families who have moved from one country to another during previous generations. This may have been because of economic need, or the need to escape from societal violence. Whatever the reasons for migrating, the migration itself impacts the communities left behind and the communities that are the new homes for those migrating. Today, persons and families continue to migrate. The reasons often parallel those of the past, and the migration impacts the places and communities left and the places and communities receiving the new immigrants.

Examples of sustainability issues from the past that affect the present and the future can be seen in the following articles:

Deforestation and desertification:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/eye/deforestation/effect.html>

Effects of Mining: <https://www.oxfam.org.au/explore/mining/impacts-of-mining/>

Effects of Migration <http://www.globalissues.org/article/537/immigration#EffectsofImmigration>

There are many issues that could be used as examples. The point is not to accumulate examples but rather to use the examples to create a picture or a mosaic of the economic, environmental or social reality anywhere in the world.

Reading about crises and problems can seem overwhelming. The opening paragraph from Agenda 21 raises the critical issues that are before the world community.

*“Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy and a continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being. However, the integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfillment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed eco-systems, and a safer, more prosperous future. No nation can achieve this on its own; but together we can – in a global partnership for sustainable development.”*

*Preamble, Agenda 21. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division of Sustainable Development.*

To solve the problems and address the issues before humanity requires a sense of hope and possibility in order for us to seek out solutions. That balance of burden of the past and hope for the future provides a space to think about sustainability with hope:

“But the biggest obstacle to reinventing ourselves may simply be a kind of paralysis of hope. It is possible to see very clearly that our current economies are toxic, destructive on a gargantuan scale, and grossly unfair—to see all this and yet still have difficulty imagining effective reform.

“It’s not that it is hard to envision the paths that reform would have to take; at this point, we have a fairly clear sense of where we need to go (on a technical level, at least, if not always on a cultural one.)....And yet despite the obvious need for change, and despite our obvious technical competence, it can still be hard to believe that real, fundamental change is possible. We are used to constant flux in the daily details of existence, yet the basic structure of the status quo always looks so unalterable.

“But it’s not. Profound change for the better does occur, even though it can be difficult to see because one of the most common effects of success is to be taken for granted...Consider first the eradication of smallpox...There are reasons for hope in many other fields as well...organic farming...renewable energy...conservation...Who knows? Maybe 50,000 years from now, our distant descendants will wonder how we managed to magnify their world in ways that we ourselves could not have imagined.”

*A History of Our World, State of the World 2003, pp. 8 – 11*

## **ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

### Understanding Eco-Systems

Eco-systems are ecological communities and their respective environment that function in an integrated manner as units. Each type of eco-system has specific flora and fauna, plants and animals as well as microorganisms and habitats for each type of living organism. Eco-systems have biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) components. All eco-systems function as integrated, dynamic units. Whatever happens in one component or part of the eco-system always affects all the other components or members of the particular eco-system. These effects can be immediate or delayed; they can be direct or indirect...but they are always there.

Anything that interrupts the dynamic equilibrium of the eco-system causes imbalance and disruption. For some disruptions, the eco-system is able to re-balance itself over time. However for others, the re-balancing is almost if not actually impossible and the eco-system is changed forever.

People often think of eco-systems as solely related to the natural world. However, the various urban and sub-urban environments are also eco-systems with the same requirements of integrated dynamic existence as the more natural environments.

All eco-systems have a set of similar requirements, even though the way these requirements are met is very different from eco-system to eco-system.

#### Requirement 1: Balance, flow and dynamic equilibrium

For an eco-system to function, there has to be the ability for dynamic flow throughout the eco-system. Water, nutrients, wastes, etc. are used and re-used in such a way that what is needed or used by one member or community within the eco-system can be transformed into substances that can be used by other members of the eco-systems. Food chains and the water cycle are often used as the simplest examples of this dynamic equilibrium.

Whatever interrupts this flow disrupts the eco-system. These interruptions can be natural or human made. The point is that they exist and they disrupt. The question is whether the individual eco-system can recover over time. The answer is that it depends on the interruption.

#### Requirement 2: Non-accumulation

Anything that accumulates in any part of the eco-system disrupts the eco-system. The accumulation of any substance or population within the eco-system puts stress on the normal flow and balance within the eco-system and, if allowed to continue, can destroy the eco-system itself. This possibility for destruction can come from a variety of directions. Non-flow causes the other components or members of the eco-system to do without. In addition, the accumulation causes stress wherever it occurs. Even if what accumulates is a good thing, too much of it can destroy or disrupt.

There are two forms in which accumulation takes place: within an organism and outside of the organism. Most people become aware of an accumulation only when there is a physical disruption of an eco-system. This disruption can happen because waste accumulates or because of the impact of natural disasters, or because a new plant or animal is introduced into an eco-system, many times inadvertently because of shipping or other transportation related events. Whatever the reason, the accumulation is disruptive and often destructive.

The second type of accumulation is called bio-accumulation and results from the movement of a substance through a food chain. The substance passes through the members of the food chain without being processed or changed into something else through digestion or other body functions. On any food chain, the higher the organism, the more of the lower organisms it will have to consume in order to survive. As this passing-on process (eat and be eaten) continues, some substances accumulate as they are moved through the food chain.

There are numerous substances that are called BATs or bio-accumulative toxins. Toxins mean that the substances are toxic or death-causing in sufficient amounts. Bio-accumulative means that they accumulate as they are passed through the food chains. Persistent bio-accumulative toxins (PBTs) are those that remain in all the organisms of the food chain, including humans. PBTs can be transported over distances, both long and short, and can move easily from air to land and to water. Many PBTs are the results of emissions from manufacturing, mining and other processes that move substances from one place to another and also change the form in which the substance is naturally found on the earth. Many PBTs have profound effects on health, including malformation during pre-natal development and reduction of the ability to learn.

What is amazing is that the release into the atmosphere of PBTs is not illegal, nor is it always regulated.

Brief background readings that may be helpful:

Eco-systems: <http://library.thinkquest.org/11353/ecosystems.htm>

Bio-accumulation – mercury:

<http://www.ec.gc.ca/mercure-mercury/default.asp?lang=en&n=d721ac1f-1>

[http://www.ec.gc.ca/mercure-](http://www.ec.gc.ca/mercure-mercury/default.asp?lang=en&n=d721ac1f-1)

### Ecological Succession and Climax Communities

There is a natural succession of change in the organisms that inhabit an area or eco-system. Natural succession is the gradual supplanting of one community of plants, and associated animals and other organisms, by another within a dynamic ecosystem, without human intervention. For example, if there is a fire somewhere, after the fire dies down and the earth cools, there will be a specific set of organisms, both plant and animal, that begins to inhabit the area. Over time, others will follow these first organisms in a natural succession over the months and years. Each group of organisms changes the environment so that, as an integrated group, they can no longer live there. But in fact, the set of organisms has changed the environment so as to make that specific environment more hospitable and acceptable to the next set of plants and animals.

This succession of change will continue until there is a specific set of plants, animals and other integrated organisms that can live in the environment they create. This last set is called the “climax community” and the plants and animals living there are called climax organisms.

In the northeast part of the US, the natural succession of plants (flora is as follows: lichens, moss, grasses, small shrubs, large shrubs, birch and poplar trees, white pine, beech and then maple. Each of these plants (both large and small) changes the environment in which it is growing until it is a better environment for those plants that will take its place. Each plant type has associated animal forms; therefore as the plants change, so do the animals.

The glorious colors of the autumn in New England come from the various tree types with the bright maples providing the vivid reds. Maples predominate because they are climax organisms, that is, they can grow in the environment they create.



The key question regarding natural succession is whether or not humans are climax organisms. The answer is: no one knows. The question of environmental sustainability is directly related to that of humans and natural succession.

Brief background readings that may be helpful:

Ecological succession: <http://regentsprep.org/Regents/biology/units/ecology/ecological.cfm>

Climax communities:

[http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/dl/free/0072919876/69533/eng40007\\_ch06.pdf](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/dl/free/0072919876/69533/eng40007_ch06.pdf)

Balance and Imbalance – nitrogen-oxide levels:

<http://www.usgcrp.gov/usgcrp/seminars/97224DD.html>

### Access, Control, and Benefit

Building on the environmental concepts presented, we now add the lenses of Access, Control and Benefit. Who we are and where we are in the world affects these key issues when it comes to the local, communal and national environment. In fact, to these “layers of locations,” environmental sustainability requires that we look at the world as a whole because there are no borders or boundaries for the air and much of the water. Migration of pollution, of seeds and microorganisms has been well documented.

The following three case studies provide illustration of the integrated nature of environmental sustainability. Each of the cases is an illustration of the complexity of environmental sustainability and the impact of human activity.

### **Suggestion for Study – Water**

Watch the DVD: THIRST. Then watch it again.

Questions:

- What are the major issues raised in the program?
- What are the issues related to access to water?
- What are the issues related to control?
- What are the key issues related to benefit from the water?
- Who has the power to bring about change? What are the sources of that power?

**Deforestation.** Choose one or two of the following articles for study. Then consider the questions that follow.

Deforestation in Amazon Rainforest in Brazil.

<http://www.mongabay.com/brazil.html>

<http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/cgi-bin/texis/webinator/printall?/Study/LBA/index.html>

What do you see as the main causes of deforestation in this rainforest?

Who is benefiting from this deforestation?

What access do the indigenous Indian communities have to decision-making affecting their lives?

What are the main impacts of this deforestation upon the environment?

How has the power of the Brazilian government in formulating land policies contributed to this situation?

**Mining. Freeport McMoran in West Papua New Guinea**

[http://www.businessweek.com/2000/00\\_31/b3692148.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/2000/00_31/b3692148.htm)

How have the activities of Freeport McMoran impacted

- the lives of individuals in the areas where their mines are operating
- the environment?

How has the power of the Indonesian government been used in this issue?

Who is benefiting from the actions of Freeport McMoran in Indonesia?

What access do the indigenous peoples have to the decision-making processes?

## **ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY**

Throughout human history, human beings have lived in relationship with one another. Although these relationships have changed in many ways over time, one consistent component has been the work that one person does which provides some product or service to another who, in turn, provides some good or service either for the first person or for others. Over time, currency or money has evolved as a substitute for the direct reception of the goods or services, allowing persons to accumulate money as a “hedge” against need in the future.

This provision of goods or services can either occur locally between persons who directly know each other or between persons or groups of persons over distances. The farther apart the workers and the recipients or beneficiaries of the work, the more intermediaries are needed to convey the products or services and to transport the payments, in other products or services or in currency. Each of these intermediaries, providing additional goods or services, adds to the cost or price of the original good or service. In addition, those who have the ability to control the movement of or access to the goods or services have the ability to extract extra costs for themselves. Profit, simply defined, is the difference between price received for the good or service and the cost of production and distribution.

Most discussions of economics and/or business are about profit and profitability, that is, what can be gained from doing a particular type of business. Economic sustainability raises another set of questions and demands a different type of analysis.

*Economic sustainability is about what remains for the worker and his/her family, what remains for the community, what remains for the society or country.*

As we will see, it is not enough to say, “What is left over” for the worker, the family, the community or country. Economic sustainability is about an economic system that enables the worker, his/her family, the community, society and country to provide for their present and future needs and for the attainment of standards of life that are commensurate with human dignity.

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## ECONO-SYSTEMS

An economic parallel to the eco-system is the econo-system. The econo-system has the same characteristics as the eco-system. There are communities within the econo-system. Members of the communities function in relationship to one another and as part of the econo-system. In the econo-system, the same requirements are present, as noted below.

### Requirement 1: Balance, flow and dynamic equilibrium

Resources, money, power and all the other components of the econo-system must continue to flow through the econo-system for the achievement of economic sustainability of persons/family, the community, the country, and the world.

### Requirement 2: Non-accumulation

Accumulation of money, power, etc. in certain parts of the econo-system means that correspondingly there are places and persons without that power, money, etc. This is true whether we are analyzing the situation and reality of persons and families, of communities, of nations or of the world.

The underlying question is how we measure the effects of economic balance and imbalance. The more global our perspective, the greater will be the urgency to do that measuring and analysis, as we become more aware of the results of such imbalances on human life.

### **Suggested Study: Read Sustainability of Whom? Sustainability of What? On the CREA website.**

Given the wages or income they receive, do the workers ( maquila workers, coffee farmers, crafts workers) interviewed in this study achieve sustainability? Why or why not?

How do you evaluate the standards for housing, nutrition, water, health, etc. that have been established for the study by CREA? Would you be willing to live according to these minimum standards? Why or why not?

How interrelated with the lives of these workers is your life? How do you see the principles of “benefit balance” in the econo-system occurring in this inter-relationship?

What steps do you see as necessary to achieve a benefit balance?

### Defining Need and Necessity

Defining need and necessity must be done in a manner that reflects the inherent dignity of each and every human being. The danger is defining need in terms of survival or limiting it to improvement of an insufficient standard of living.

Most people meet their needs and those of their families by working for themselves or for others.

*The core question is whether that work supplies or earns sufficient purchasing power to meet those needs.*

When workers are self-employed, the term “income” is the term used to define the money and therefore the purchasing power earned. When workers work for someone else, the terms wages and salary are used.

There are many terms used to define wages. A legal minimum wage is just that: the lowest amount that it is legally permissible to pay someone. Minimum wage standards are not set in relationship to costs and needs. Efforts to raise minimum wage standards meet much opposition from employers almost anywhere in the world because of the relationship of the cost of wages and the profit made.

Defining the standards for the Sustainable Living Wage (SLW) has been the core work of CREA, a social economic research center in Hartford, CT ([www.crea.org](http://www.crea.org)). Seeking to set specific standards for defining wage/income levels, CREA has defined five wage/income levels based on the ability achieved by workers at each of the levels to meet the needs of family and community.

*Level 1: Marginal Survival Wage*

Wage level does not provide for adequate nutritional needs.

Starvation is prevented, but malnutrition, illnesses, and early deaths are the result.

*Level 2: Basic Survival Wage*

Wage level allows for meeting immediate survival needs including basic food, used clothing, minimal shelter, fuel for cooking.

*Level 3: Short Range Planning Wage*

Wage level meets basic survival needs.

Possibility of small amount of discretionary income allows for minimal planning beyond living from paycheck to paycheck.

Allows for occasional purchase of needed item(s) as small amounts can be set aside from meeting basic survival needs

*Level 4: Sustainable Living Wage*

Wage level meets basic needs including food, water, clothing, housing, energy, transportation, healthcare, and education.

Provides ability to participate in culturally required activities (including contribution to the tax base of the community, and the activities surrounding weddings, births, and funerals.)

Allows for the setting aside of small amounts of money (savings) to allow for planning for the future purchase of items and meeting of needs.

*Level 5: Sustainable Community Wage*

In addition to meeting basic needs and allowing worker to set aside money for future purchases, allows for the availability of enough discretionary income to allow worker to support the development of small businesses in a local community, including the support of cultural and civic needs of the community.

Wage levels allow for long range planning and participation.

The Sustainable Living Wage (SLW) is measured in terms of purchasing power, that is, the ability to purchase needed items and services, to contribute to the tax base of the community, to provide for

savings and to support small businesses in the local community. The standards set for a Sustainable Living Wage are part of the Purchasing Power Index (PPI) designed by CREA and used in its research internationally.

Specific standards for nutrition, water, housing, clothing, education and other components of the SLW have also been established. The central question for sustainability of the worker and his/her family is whether there is sufficient purchasing power earned by the worker within a reasonable work week to meet those standards.

### **Suggestions for your study. Standards for the Sustainable Living Wage/Income Applied to Your Community**

Read the standards for the Sustainable Living Wage/Income as defined in [El Salvador: Sustain-Ability](#). Find out what the legal minimum wage is for the community where you are living. Start with the standards for housing and related needs. How much income would be required to meet each of those needs in the community where you live?

Questions:

- Who can afford to live in your community?
- What would the minimum wage have to be for anyone to be able to live there?
- What does this say about access, benefit and control for living in your community?

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#### Sustaining a Community

Communities need social and physical infrastructure to exist. Physical infrastructure provides roads, electricity, telephone, housing, water and sanitation. Social infrastructure provides health care, education, recreation and other similar services. In some communities these are more formalized than others but there is no question about the need for the physical and social infrastructure to exist and be accessible and affordable by all members of the community.

Communities provide for their members through the creation of common good funds and resources. Some communities use common good labor (service time) by members to provide these physical and social infrastructure components. (Read the story on water in La Palma, El Salvador as an illustration.)

Normally, common good funds are called taxes, the money paid by each of the members of the community to the community government. While there are parts of the world where the concept of taxes is derided, there is really no other way to provide for the needs of the community. The sense that any person or any family can provide everything for itself is an indulgence only for the very rich. The two central questions are: Who provides the tax base (pays the taxes?) How are our taxes spent?

Communities on the local, state and national levels receive tax monies from several sources:

- From persons who pay income tax
- From businesses, both small and large, who pay the equivalent of income tax
- Sales tax or value added tax (VAT) that are essentially taxes on consumption.

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#### WHAT STAYS IN THE COMMUNITY

Sustainable communities, whether on the local or national levels, require a tax base in order to provide the physical and social infrastructure required to meet the needs of the community..

In the global economy, there are numerous situations throughout the world where jobs have been provided and yet where the tax base for providing physical and social infrastructure is not available. The

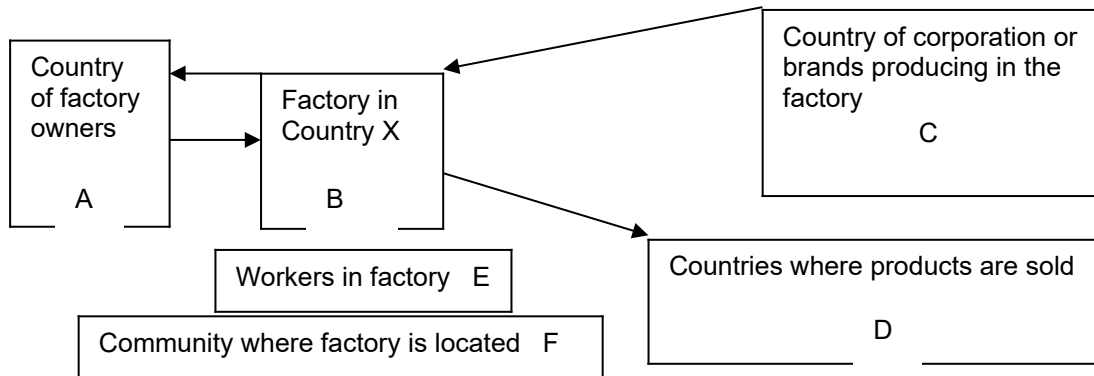
key question when jobs are created anywhere in the world is: What stays in the community as a result of those jobs?

### Free Trade Zones

Many countries throughout the world there are areas set aside for industrial development and production. These have many names: maquilas, free trade zones, export processing zones, enterprise enhancement zones, etc. Whatever the country and whatever the name, these zones have several things in common:

1. Production is usually for export.
2. Ownership can be by persons from the country where the factory is located. However the factory is more likely to be owned by persons or corporations from other countries.
3. Businesses in the zone are given decreased tax rates or exemption from paying taxes for a specified number of years. This is to encourage the businesses to locate in the zones.
4. The factory has little or no responsibility for the provision of the physical or social infrastructure for the community in which the factory is located. These remain the responsibility of the host community.
5. The vast majority of the jobs created are minimum wage jobs. Often the application of national labor laws is modified to provide increased incentive to businesses. This modification usually results in a reduction in workers' rights (for example, to have a union or to strike.)

The question of what remains for economic sustainability in this supply chain system can be seen in the following diagram.



A - Country of factory owners – May or may not receive the taxes from the persons or corporations owning the factories, depending on national law.

B – Factory in Country X – Usually located in one of the free trade zones. Therefore pays low or no taxes to the community where located.

C – Country of corporation or brand producing or placing orders in the factory – Many brands do not own the factories in which their products are made. Therefore they do not have direct responsibility for wages or taxes in the production community. Often the brand will use its power to place orders to bargain for the lowest price possible. Depending on the country and state in which the corporation is incorporated, the corporation/brand will be paying varying amounts of taxes.

D – Countries where product are sold – Benefit from sales taxes on products sold.

E – Workers in the factory – Because workers need the jobs in these free trade zones, they are willing to accept the low wages offered. The key is what options the workers have. In many countries there are few other options.

Because the wages the workers earn are so low, the amount of taxes they can pay is also low. Therefore the government of that country often does not have a sufficient tax base to provide adequate physical and social infrastructure. In this system, so common throughout the global economy in industry after industry, it is easy to see how difficult economic sustainability is for persons and families, for communities and for countries.

#### Background Reading

Definition and description of Free Trade Zones. <http://www.answers.com/free%20trade%20zones>

#### Micro-Credit and Micro-Finance

One of the major limiting factors to the development of small businesses within local communities is the inability to obtain credit, or financing, for the initial expenses of beginning the business. Since the development of the Grameen Project in Bangladesh in 1976 and its establishment as a bank in 1983, a growing movement of micro-credit and micro-financing has developed. In varying ways, this movement

has provided the initial moneys, in relatively small amounts, and usually to women, to begin a small business.

This approach radically differs from that of conventional banks that lend mostly to rich or moderate income individuals or entities. The movement now reaches 100 million poor people in many countries. It has improved lives of families and has helped local communities and provides an alternative vision of ways to achieve economic sustainability.

[www.grameenfoundation.org/what-we-do/microfinance-basics](http://www.grameenfoundation.org/what-we-do/microfinance-basics)

### Privatization

Privatization occurs in several ways:

- Selling off of assets held by the public, such as electricity, oil, mineral, land or water resources to companies that are privately owned or owned by shareholders in a corporation
- Contracting of the building and/or management of public facilities to private companies or corporations, the contracts for which vary
- Establishing Public Private Partnerships, which may be of various types.

Privatization is ordinarily done by the government of a city, state or nation (1) to obtain the efficient provision of services that the administration or legislative body of a government is unable or unwilling to provide; 2) to obtain the means to make use of or to exploit the resources of the country such as oil or coal; (2) and to raise money, ostensibly to meet needs that the government's income or borrowing cannot cover.

While governments have contracted to private service providers for generations in the U.S. and in other countries, the large scale conversion of public properties and assets to private ownership and/or management has been occurring on an unprecedented scale in recent decades. This has been particularly true of the former Communist nations, where public assets were privatized with a speed that has resulted in legal inquiries, such as is presently happening in Russia. It is also happening in poor countries that need financial assistance and find that openness to privatization is a condition for loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, or for entrance into the World Trade Organization. Privatization of the building and/or management of water services have already occurred in numerous U.S. municipalities. Water rights continue to be bought and sold in the western part of the United States.

The importance of public awareness of the privatization process is crucial to the protection of local and national interests. Contracts with private corporations require sophisticated participation, or else they can result in the sudden increases in fees for the services, or loss of services, or law-suits by the corporations for their alleged loss of income. This has already occurred numerous countries. Of particular concern is the privatization of water resources, in the face of the water crisis facing the planet. The experience of Cochabamba, Bolivia, is a striking example.

Two Case Studies are referenced here for your study.

### Case Studies

Privatization. Water in Cochabamba, Bolivia

[http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2010/4/21/cochabamba\\_the\\_water\\_wars\\_and\\_climate\\_change](http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2010/4/21/cochabamba_the_water_wars_and_climate_change)



Micro-credit and Micro-finance. Fonkoze and Haiti [www.fonkoze.org](http://www.fonkoze.org)  
Shared Interest and South Africa [www.sharedinterest.org](http://www.sharedinterest.org)

Economic sustainability strengthens the ability of the family, community and country to provide for its members and citizens. Without economic sustainability, the increased difficulty of meeting human needs, or the total inability to meet them, results in behaviors and actions that cause instability in the social fabric of the family, the community, and the country.

These behaviors or actions include the splitting up of the family, as individual members search for opportunities to make money, migration out of the community, increased borrowing and debt on the part of the family, community and nation. A downward spiral results from the struggle to meet interest payments. Inability to keep up with payments results in loss of homes, community services, and national assets as the debt payments require the selling of assets. In the face of economic inequality within and among nations, anger and resentment increase, and crime and even terrorism on an international scale result. We are witnessing all of these consequences in our world today. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of economic sustainability.

## **SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The achievement of economic sustainability, beginning with the ability of workers to achieve wages or income on a Sustainable Community Level, is the foundation for social sustainability within a family, community and nation. When the worker is able to provide for the family and to support community obligations, then the community has sufficient tax base to provide the social infrastructure that meets the needs that the family is unable to provide for itself, such as health care, education, roads and transportation systems, energy and water supply, and the demands of construction and maintenance.

The provision of this infrastructure, however, presents another series of challenges. The governing entity in the community ordinarily has the responsibility and authority to establish this infrastructure. When the governing system functions in a fair and just manner, the resulting social infrastructure is positioned to meet the needs of the individuals, families and businesses within the community. When the governing system is not functioning in a just manner, the resulting infrastructure can be skewed meeting the desires of the families and friends of the governing class, or it can crumble due to neglect or corruption, or both may happen simultaneously. Tax monies may be allocated to the demands of those possessing wealth or power, with little or no monies left to meet the needs of the rest of the society.

The question is what type of social infrastructure is available and to whom? What type of physical infrastructure is available and who has access to what parts of that infrastructure? What brings this sort of situation about?

### **Suggestion for Study: The Costs of Health Care**

A core component of the social infrastructure is health care. In the US, the terms health insurance and health care are sometimes used interchangeably; however we are examining health care.

For whatever community in which you are located:

How is health care provided? What is the system of health care?

What is the role of health insurance? Is it publicly provided (through a social system) or through private insurance?

How is the health insurance paid for?  
Does the health insurance pay for everything? What is covered and what is not covered?  
Who decides what would be covered?  
Is everyone covered by insurance guaranteed the same type of health care? Why or why not?  
Who decides?  
If you were going to design a health care system for your community, what would it cover?  
Why?

### **The Cost of Education**

The costs of the education system have a variety of components. In some communities, access to education is provided through the tax structure of the community. In the US, public education is funded through the real estate taxes of the community. Communities with a better tax base usually have better schools. However these are not the only costs of education. Textbooks, school supplies, fees for programs, etc. all are costs that have to be met by the families of the students. In the US and other industrialized countries, completion of secondary school (high school or its equivalent) is the norm while in developing countries, completion of primary school is considered a major achievement.

In other countries, there are school fees simply to attend school. Then there are uniform costs as well as the costs of textbooks, supplies and transportation, depending on how close to the school a student might live.

For the community where you live in whatever country you are located:

- What are the sources of funding for the schools?
- What percentage of students completes primary school?
- What percentage completes secondary school?
- Are there gender differences? What are they?
- What costs does the family of the student have in order for the student to attend school?
- Are all the schools in your community equal in terms of the education they provide? Why or why not?
- How are students affected by the different standards of education?
  - What is the short-term effect? The long-term effect?
- Who determines how education will be provided, its standard and form?
- Who benefits from the educational system being the way it is? Who is harmed?

It is not uncommon for parents to seek the best education for their children. Because schools are not equal even in local communities, movement from one community to another, from one country to another so that children might benefit is the path many parents have taken.

### Housing and Migration

Migration, or the movement of some members of a family to other communities and countries often results in family and communal breakdown. Nuclear families have to function without the support of the extended family, and consequently they experience the stresses of finding and doing work that brings income, obtaining child care and taking care of their own family's physical and social needs.

Migration often occurs in the search for work and means of income. This frequently means moving into an urban area, an industrialized area or large-scale farm. When jobs are plentiful and workers are needed, the migrants are welcomed and are given good wages. Their tax payments increase the tax base of the community, which in turn is then able to provide the physical and social infrastructure that

these new families need. When jobs are scarce and workers are plentiful, the migrants either do not find jobs, or find jobs which offer low wages.

When this is the case, the needs of their families for adequate housing, health care, and education go unmet by the larger community. The family must “make do” as they do without.

Two illustrations are helpful to understand the effect on social sustainability of the need for work and income.

### **Example 1: Migration and Housing at the US-Mexican border**

As we have seen, the ability to create social infrastructure is closely aligned with the ability of a community and/or nation state to achieve economic sustainability. Over the past 40+ years, Mexicans from the central part of Mexico have migrated to the border region in northern Mexico in search of work in the maquilas (maquiladoras). Maquilas are assembly plants for many industries, usually located in maquila zones. Rarely has there been any planning for housing and other components of social infrastructure. To understand the reality of workers, go to the CREA website: [www.crea-inc.org](http://www.crea-inc.org) Click on Publications and Resources. Then click on “Making the Invisible Visible” in Spanish or in English. pages 19-28 on housing offer relevant information.

What do you think would make a worker and his/her family move to the colonias (areas where housing is possible) near the maquilas?

What do you think would be the effects on a family to live in any of these houses?

What is required to transform a house or living situation into a home?

### **Migrant Workers in the USA**

*Read and reflect on the information on this website: [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org) › [Immigration](#)*

What do you think would make someone leave his/her home country and become a migrant worker?

Migrant workers provide the labor for harvesting fruits and vegetables here in the US.

How would you describe the lack of social sustainability for the workers and their families that results from that labor? What are the key issues?

Should migrant labor be abolished? Why or why not?

How does migrant labor in the US affect the families and communities of the workers back in their home countries? What are the positive effects? What are the negative effects?

### **Remittances – Money sent back home**

The issue of money sent back home by family members working in other countries is critical to the social and economic sustainability of the families and home communities of workers living in their home countries. Remittance is the term for this money sent home on a regular basis. These remittances are very important, not only to the families, but to the home countries. Each year more than 20% of the Gross Domestic Product of the country of El Salvador comes from remittances. And that is the percentage calculated on the known (and taxed) remittances. Other monies return to El Salvador on a regular basis through the system of couriers that carry money, food, and other items back and forth between the US and El Salvador.

One of the key reasons that Fair Trade products are so important is that they assist the families in earning sufficient income to make it unnecessary for family members to migrate in search of other work.

When more than 20% of the productivity of a country comes from labor outside that country, it is clear that the country in itself has not achieved the goal of economic or social sustainability. Achieving and maintaining sustainability is the both the historic and the contemporary challenge facing every nation.

### Other Forces of Disruption of Sustainability

While we have focused on the relationship between economic and social sustainability, we must recognize that there are other disruptive forces that intrude on the ability of families, communities and nations to sustain themselves. Certainly war and natural catastrophes fall into this category. In countries that have been at war for many years, the disruption of all forms of sustainability is prolonged, as the cooperative nature of sustainability is the antithesis of war and violence.

Outsourcing of jobs, made possible by the technological advances in communications and transportation, continues to affect the sustainability of families and communities. Jobs are lost from some communities. Jobs are gained in other communities. Often the outsourcing is done to reduce labor costs, and the movement of the job is to localities where workers' wages are low, labor laws are poor or poorly enforced, and environmental regulation is insufficient or poorly enforced. The key focus for this discussion is how the loss of jobs in one community and/or the gain of jobs in another affect the environmental, economic and social sustainability of the communities involved.

Many of these outsourced jobs are moved to free trade zones. While the economic sustainability of the worker and his/her family is improved, wages are often not at the sustainable living wage level, and labor laws are often suspended or modified within the zones. The workers' ability to organize for their own improvement is therefore limited. The businesses in the free trade zones are frequently offered tax incentives, and so are not taxed in the same way as businesses in the community. The community is deprived of that contribution to its tax base. The dislocation of the worker from the family and community can deeply affect the social sustainability of both their families and their host community.

Lastly the concentration of jobs in these special zones can and does produce deeply negative impact on the environment. A classic example would be the Pearl River Delta in China where many of the factories producing a broad spectrum of products are located. The concentration of hundreds of thousands of workers and the factories where they work has produced some of the most polluted air in the world. The need for electricity, produced by the burning of coal, accounts for the polluted air. The concentration of workers and their housing needs has resulted in serious depletion of the underground water supply. The separation of the workers from their families and communities during their work years provides an additional disruption of social sustainability even while another social setting is continuously formed in the factory communities. How this will all play out in the future remains to be seen.

Another contemporary phenomenon resulting from the technological advances has been the rise of mega-sized corporations. The globalization of the economy has created an enormous global supply chain that has become increasingly efficient as information technology has advanced. To take advantage of this development, and to increase their own efficiencies of operation, corporations frequently merge. In addition, chains of stores increasingly are able to track supply and demand for their products.

The advantage of size and wealth has enabled stores and corporations that originally were based in industrialized countries to buy out other stores and corporations in their home country, merge in some fashion with smaller stores or corporations in other countries, and build facilities. This combination of

wealth, size and technology has enabled owners or shareholders in such enterprises to create behemoths of industrialization and commercialization, and incredible wealth.

What has not occurred, at least to the present moment in time, has been the sharing out of this wealth with the workers in these enterprises, and the communities in which they are located.

It may be appropriate to ask once again:

*What type of world do we want to create for the future and what is required for that creation to be possible ?*

*For whom do we want that type of world?*

*Who are we including?*

## **MEASUREMENTS, INDICATORS AND INFORMATION**

How do we measure sustainability? Standing outside a situation and looking in allows us to describe, raise questions, seek answers, etc. While we can recognize “good situations” and those that are not, the ability to measure, to compare and to learn from what is measured is key in a world where communication and information can be readily available.

Standards of measurement are important. They tell us what the key issues are and what we are aiming to do in developing programs, practices and policies for economic, social and environmental sustainability. There are numerous sets of criteria against which we can measure. The following are but some of these formulations. The ultimate question as to their usefulness will come from whether they are good measures...and whether measuring against them inspires and brings forth the best practices.

There are many sets of information. Providing information has two components: the actual information itself and the process by which the reporting entity collects and formulates the information. Oftentimes, the process is as important as the information provided, because the process calls forth reflection and analysis of what is being done. From that reflection and analysis, the learnings can oftentimes lead to positive change.

### The UN Millennium Development Goals

In September 2000 the world’s leaders endorsed a set of measurable goals to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, discrimination against women and environmental degradation. The Millennium Declaration also include a broad set of commitments to democracy, human rights and good governance.

The following website provides current information: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

### The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) was launched in 1997 as a cooperative project between the United Nations Development Program and the CERES Coalition. Building on CERES reporting standards for the environment, the GRI seeks to extend standardized, public sustainability reporting by corporations and institutions on the economic, social and environmental dimensions of their activities as well as the services and/or products provided.

The GRI reporting guidelines can be found at [www.globalreporting.org](http://www.globalreporting.org)

Carefully read the Guidelines. They are available in 10 languages. If you are fluent in another language beside English you might want to read the Guidelines in that language if it is available.

Reflect on the content of the GRI indicators and the information that a GRI reporter (corporation, university, NGO, etc.) would provide. How might that information inform the work or progress towards the Millennium Goals? Are there indicators or information you would like to see that are not included in the GRI indicators? If so, what are they?

The CERES Coalition [www.ceres.org](http://www.ceres.org)

Go to the website of the CERES Coalition and familiarize yourself with the website.

Then click on “Sustainability Reporting” on the left side of the home page

Read “The History of Stakeholder Engagement”

### Community Information

There are numerous listservs and websites available on the Internet that provide community based information from NGOs and other civil society groups throughout the world. Some of these are:

Right to Water, a listserv available at the following website. <http://www.waterobservatory.org/>

Third World Network [www.twinside.org.sg](http://www.twinside.org.sg)

Globalization and Health This listserv can be found on the web site for the Center for Policy Analysis on Trade and Health <http://www.cpath.org/>

Oxfam [www.oxfamusa.org](http://www.oxfamusa.org)

Catholic Relief Services [www.crs.org](http://www.crs.org)

### **AJOR PLAYERS, MANY VOICES**

It should be obvious by now that the issue of sustainability is a complicated one. Whether we are talking about environmental, economic or social sustainability, there are many players, many voices, many sources of power and of responsibility impacting what happens in families, communities and countries. We examine now some other sources of power, voice, and information that impact efforts for sustainability on any level.

#### The United Nations

We have already looked at some of the work that is being done at the United Nations to implement the Millennium Goals. The work of most UN organizations is important for national and global sustainability.

United Nations [www.un.org](http://www.un.org) See brief background on the UN at

<http://www.un.org/Overview/brief.html>

- UNDP United Nations Development Program <http://www.undp.org/>
- UNIFEM United Nations Development Fund For Women [www.unifem.undp.org/](http://www.unifem.undp.org/)
- UNICEF United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [www.unicef.org/](http://www.unicef.org/)
- UNCTAD United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [www.unctad.org/](http://www.unctad.org/)
- UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
[www.unesco.org/](http://www.unesco.org/)

- United Nations General Assembly <http://www.un.org/ga/59/>
- United Nations Security Council <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/>
- United Nations Commission on Human Rights [www.un.org/rights](http://www.un.org/rights)

### The International Labor Organization (ILO)

The ILO is a UN associated organization devoted to the broad spectrum of topics related to work and labor standards. It develops Conventions and proposes them for ratification by the UN member nations, which then agree to be held accountable to the ILO for their implementation. The ILO also provides training in labor rights in response to requests from countries. It works with governments, employers and workers.

Go to the ILO website [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org) and examine the following:

The Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. You can access this in the lower right hand corner of the ILO home page.

The ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work was adopted in 1998. The Declaration defines “the commitment by governments, employers' and workers' organizations to uphold basic human values - values that are vital to our social and economic lives.”

The Declaration covers four areas:

- Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining
- The elimination of forced and compulsory labor
- The abolition of child labor
- The elimination of discrimination in the workplace

### The World Trade Organization (WTO)

The World Trade Organization was established in 1994 by the Marrakesh Agreement reached after eight years of trade negotiations among nations, called the Uruguay Round. The WTO came into effect in 1995 after ratification by the legislative entities of the member states. Its purpose is to develop a rule-based multi-lateral trading system among nations in order to ensure the smooth trading of goods and services. Member nations, through their national legislative processes, agree to abide by the rules. At the present time 148 nations are WTO members.

When disputes arise between or among nations over trade matters, the WTO Dispute Resolution Panel and Appellate Body make binding decisions to settle the dispute. The dispute resolution is enforced by either the implementation of the decision through a change in the laws or regulations of the nation that the decision rules against, or by the imposition of financial sanctions by the offended nation/s until the offending nation complies with the ruling.

In the years since 1995, the WTO has focused on trade in services, through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS,) the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS,) and on trade in agricultural and non-agricultural commodities.

While GATS offers the potential for making services universally available, it has also been the subject of concern and criticism. The agreement calls upon the member nations to liberalize, or open up, areas of services to providers of those services from other WTO member countries. WTO member nations have been requested to submit to the WTO a listing, or schedule of those services that they agree to open up

to providers from other WTO members. Examples of such services could include communications and transportation systems, health services, educational services, insurance and accounting.

The GATS will cover any area of service-provision that the member nation agrees to open up. While the provision of such services by providers from other countries has existed on an informal basis in many countries, agreement to open up the service places severe restrictions upon the conditions under which the service can be contracted. In general, the requirements placed upon the provider must not discriminate between domestic providers of the service and foreign providers. This means, for example, that conditionality cannot be placed upon the foreign provider, such as using a certain percentage of domestic labor or domestic supplies, or upon the make-up of the labor force with respect to women or minorities. The WTO is presently working on establishing regulations regarding the qualifications of service providers.

The most recent round of negotiations is the Doha Round, which is still in progress. While the stated purpose of the round is to provide for the “developing,” or poor countries, its focus has been on increasing the scope of the liberalization process. The negotiations have been stalled over the subsidies that developed countries have placed on agricultural commodities, and the demands of the poorer countries that those subsidies be reduced or ended in order to create a level playing field for their agricultural products. They also demand that the developed countries open up their markets to and reduce tariffs upon commodities from the poorer countries. The strength of Brazil, India and China has given a clout to the demands of the developing countries, which have banded together to form a negotiating bloc. This is the first time the WTO has faced a group of nations that has had the strength to derail its proceedings, as at Seattle and Cancun. The WTO historically has been controlled by the wealthier industrialized countries, whose sophisticated legal systems and expertise in negotiating have given them a controlling power.

The WTO is a young and powerful organization. It has the potential for bringing order into the global trading system, and for creating a fairer global economy. However, it also has the potential for undermining the decision-making power of its member nations and their local governments over domestic labor, environmental and procurement regulations. The rule making of the WTO has been dominated so far by the wealthy, industrialized countries. The emergence of a real negotiating power among the poorer countries, and a growing awareness of the impact of the WTO system on national sovereignty provide a promise and a hope that the future will see the development of a more just WTO structure.

See the following web sites for further background reading.

[www.wto.org](http://www.wto.org) World Trade Organization

[www.twinside.org.sg/title/hist-cn.htm](http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/hist-cn.htm) Analysis of the establishment of the WTO from a Third World perspective. The Third World Network web site provides a continuing analysis of the actions of the WTO.

#### The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank

These international financial organizations were created after World War II for the purpose of providing for the rebuilding of nations devastated by the war, for stabilizing the world financial market, and for providing loans for development projects. Because their voting arrangements are based on the monetary donations of the member countries, the IMF and the World Bank are controlled by the wealthier nations.

What has occurred through the actions of the International Monetary Fund is that poor countries have racked up debts that they cannot repay. The poor countries also have debt from the lending institutions in many countries. In many instances, the poorer countries have paid more in interest than the original



debts, and they have sunk into deeper debt than at the beginning. This burden of debt has kept the poorer countries in a state of poverty and dependence upon donor countries and further loans, and many of them have sold off their national assets to repay the debts. Untold human suffering has resulted, as the money that should have been available to provide services to their citizens has gone into debt repayment. In recent years there has been a global cry of outrage at this situation, and as a result some countries have agreed to reduce or to cancel the debt of other countries. This is a work in progress.

Unfortunately, the World Bank has had as a condition for its loans the privatization of some of the services in poor countries, and as a result World Bank funding has gone to corporations for feasibility studies, initial development expenses, etc. for the provision of such services by private corporations. This diversion of World Bank money to private corporations deprives the poorer countries of the money that could have been applied to increase the own capacities to provide their own public services.

Privatization of services means that the corporation must make its profit, and increase its profit, over and above the costs of building and maintaining its service capacity. In order to do this, it has to increase the price paid for the service. While the decision to privatize usually touts the ability of the corporation to provide efficiency and to expand services, the reality of experience in many countries is that the cost of services increases; service is shut off when people are unable to meet its costs. When a service such as water provision is privatized, real physical suffering can result. Currently there are many lengthy and emotional debates on the issue of privatization. This area is also where the General Agreement on Trade in Services is relevant, since once a country agrees to open its services to non-governmental entities, it must treat all service providers in a non-discriminatory manner.

The globalization of the economy has brought new and extremely important issues before the global community. At present, no global governing entity exists that has the power to create a democratic, open, and just system for resolving the difficulties in these issues. The WTO comes closest to a global entity, but its focus is strictly on making trade easier. The UN has the potential to become such an entity, but major nations such as the USA are resisting the giving over of such power to an international global governing system, and at times are even working to discredit the UN. This is one of the major challenges facing the world today.

#### Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs are organizations freely created by individuals and institutions to address a particular challenge or need. It was the NGO Jubilee 2000 campaign, for example, that was instrumental in creating world-wide awareness of need for debt relief for poor nations. (See <http://www.jubileeusa.org/>) Often it is only through these NGOs and their supporters that the needs of the poorer countries are brought to public attention.

The contributions of NGOs are valued at the United Nations, which has made room for their input. Their comments are also welcomed at the WTO. In the US, the NGO's provide background information for decision-makers, and bring their concerns before government entities and corporations. The NGOs provide ordinary citizens with the means to come together around an issue of special concern to them, to support the organization/s related to that issue, and to respond to calls for letters, e-mails, and other expressions of concern and support to decision-makers. As such, they provide an important service.

#### Trans-national Corporations

It is difficult to overestimate the power of huge trans-national corporations in decision-making processes. Their wealth provides access to lawmakers through their contributions; their expertise in

business results in membership on government committees and often even their leaving the corporation temporarily to take an appointment as directors of government departments or agencies. In turn, after serving in government, the individuals are sought as members of corporate boards of directors, or as leaders in other capacities, because of their close ties to the government. This is the “revolving door.” The government of the US is a striking example of this phenomenon.

Membership in international agencies and service on global commissions are also closely related to experience in high-level business positions, and provides the opportunity for corporations to influence the decision-making processes.

### National Governments

The governing entities of countries wield considerable power, whether they are democratic, authoritarian, oligarchic, military, tribal, or theocratic. They make the decisions that affect the lives of their citizens. How these governments are influenced and/or controlled by groups within the country is central to their effectiveness in meeting the needs of all of their citizens, i.e., the Common Good.

National sovereignty is the power of a country to control its own decision-making. This sovereignty is usually a point of extreme pride in the citizens of the country, who strongly resist any impingement on their independence. (Current negotiations with the Afghanistan government is one example out of many.)

However, within the country itself, governing can be influenced by the power of wealth and the human weaknesses of greed and desire for power. These two forces operate frequently to derail the governing process into the abyss of corruption and betrayal, whatever the country. It is incumbent upon the citizens of the country themselves to organize in such a way that they demand from their government the kind of governing that meets their needs. This reality is at the heart of the development of political parties, interest groups, citizen organizations, rallies and demonstrations that are so common. It is also, unfortunately, the cause of police and military actions in some countries to repress the demands of their citizens. The contemporary role of the Internet in facilitating the organizing process is a new phenomenon, providing new opportunities for positive and negative use.

### Religious Organizations and Ideologies

Historically, religious organizations and secular ideologies have played an important role in the functioning of societies, from Pantheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, to the ideologies of democracy, communism, and socialism. Each has influenced how the societies in which they have predominated meet or do not meet the environmental, social and economic sustainability needs of all of their peoples.

### Other Voices

The roles of the media, of science and education, and the voice of artists, poets, composers, and writers have over the centuries been significant factors in meeting human needs. For example, scientists have discovered causes and cures for illnesses; they track environmental changes; they lay the foundation underlying technological advances. Educators, the media, writers and artists awaken our awareness of the world around us, and motivate our response.

Reflect on the brief descriptions of the “Other Voices, Other Players” provided in this unit. What access do they have to power and services? What control? What benefits do they receive? What impact do

these players have on the environmental, economic and social sustainability of families, local communities and countries?

## **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER FOR THE FUTURE**

There is a danger in studying sustainability. It is all too easy to sit back and look at the content presented, the ideas, experiences, readings, etc. as if it all were “over there”, some place else which we can look at, analyze, discuss and write about...without ever allowing it to touch us.

By touch us I do not mean that it evokes sympathy or pity, the most common responses to encountering situations of want and need on the part of others. Rather, sustainability, when truly understood, is about us, all of us, no matter where we live on the earth. As part of the human community, when it comes to sustainability, not one of us, anywhere, is untouched by what happens elsewhere. Sure, we can put it out of mind, and simply not think about it. But that does not make the call to social, economic and environmental sustainability go someplace else where we will not be touched.

There are some who think that they as long as they live in a “safe” community, they will be untouched by what happens to others. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is one set of water on earth. One set of air. One human community. There is one eco-system that, following the laws of nature rather than the laws of demanding humans, will seek to re-balance itself, to right itself according to the laws of nature.

And there is one econo-system, yes, acting and re-acting differently in different parts of the world but binding us closer and closer as the years pass.

In reality, it is almost impossible to talk about environmental sustainability without encountering the demand and requirements of economic sustainability and then both encounter the needs of social sustainability. Yes, we learn these as component systems but at some point we need to stop and put it all together.

That putting together, that recognizing the interwoven nature of sustainability requires that we re-examine the call to deepen our awareness of the need for the Common Good, bringing together the social, economic and environmental needs of the biosphere and the human community. Sometimes, in the age of instant communication and access to information about anywhere on the earth, it is baffling that people do not see; do not want to see how the whole fits together.

There is a basic scientific principle that all actions have equal and opposite reactions. When applied to sustainability, this means that we need to see what the negative effects are when what seems to be positive program or practice or policy is presented. The significant word is “we” rather than “us vs. them”. In a truly sustainable world, there is only us.

To define and design the common good, to define and design a world that will know economic, social and environmental sustainability, we must learn to ask questions better than we do now. We must learn to understand that without questions, there will be no answers...and without both, how will we know what needs to change, what needs to be kept the way it is?

Each of us lives in different communities and countries. Each of us has different work we do. We read, we listen and speak, we write and communicate. If we can learn to consistently question and analyze, bringing the depths of our experiences and knowledge to the service of others, then the possibility of sustainability becomes more real.

There is a famous quote from the POGO comic strip from years ago in which POGO says to his companions: "We have met the enemy and it is us." That is certainly true of economic, social and environmental programs, policies and practices of the past. Yet if we are willing and able to learn from the mistakes of the past, and envision a sustainable future, then, to paraphrase Pogo, when we look for possibility for the future, it is also us.