JUSTICE, EQUITY + SUSTAINABILITY

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EQUITY?
"THAT'S NOT FOR US. WE'RE HERE TO SAVE THE WORLD."

People often ask me "why should race, class, culture, justice and equity play a role in sustainability; isn't sustainability about *'green'* things, you know, *'the environment'*?" My response is usually along the lines that irrespective of whether we take a global, statewide or more local focus, a moral or practical approach, inequity and injustice resulting from, among other things, racism and classism are bad for the environment and bad for sustainability. What is more, the *environmental or green* sustainability discourse, which includes most of the social movement and institutional discourses that dominate the sustainability and sustainable development discourse today, does not have an analysis or theory of change with strategies for dealing with current or *intra-generational* (in)equity and (in)justice issues. While researching a BBC TV program in the early 1990s, I asked a Greenpeace U.K. staffer if she felt that her organization's employees re ected multicultural Britain. She replied calmly, "No, but that's not an issue for us. We're here to save the world".

Yet, research has shown how, globally, nations with a greater commitment to equity and a correspondingly more equitable society tend to also have a greater commitment to environmental quality (Torras and Boyce, 1998). Good examples here are the Nordic countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. Similarly, in a survey of the fifty U.S. states, Boyce et al. (1999) found that those with greater inequalities in power distribution (measured by voter participation, tax fairness, Medicaid access and educational attainment levels) had less stringent environmental policies, greater levels of environmental stress and higher rates of infant mortality and premature deaths. At a more local level, a study by Morello-Frosch (1997) of counties in California showed that highly segregated counties, in terms of income, class and race, had higher levels of hazardous air pollutants. The message? From global to local, human inequity is bad for environmental quality and if sustainability is to become a process with the power to *transform*, as opposed to its current *environmental*, *stewardship* or *reform* focus, justice and equity issues need to be incorporated to its very core.

With this in mind, it is my great pleasure to write this introduction to Volume 8 of MIT Projections focusing on *Justice and Sustainability as a Framework for Planning and Action* because, as a long time researcher in the fields of environmental justice and sustainability in both the UK and US, I'm always struck by the ability of many, such as the Greenpeace UK staffer, to dissociate what I believe are two inextricably linked concepts. And this reductionism, or silo-based thinking and policy making/ planning is not limited to social movement organizations. For example, Warner (2002, p. 37), in an internet-based survey, found that "more than 40 percent of the largest cities (33 of 77) in the U.S. had sustainability projects on the web, but only five of these dealt with environmental justice on their web pages." He argued that: "few communities were building environmental justice into local definitions of sustainability. Only five local sustainability projects made these connections: Albuquerque, New Mexico; Austin, Texas; Cleveland, Ohio; San Francisco, California and Seattle, Washington."

This clearly illustrates the pervasiveness of what I call the *equity deficit* in much current U.S. (and global) sustainability discourse and consequent policy and planning practice. Only one of Warner's case study cities, San Francisco, appeared to fully integrate the two concepts in its Sustainability Plan, which was adopted in 1997. It has five environmental justice goals and its suite of sustainability indicators includes three environmental justice indicators. This integration is what the Europeans call *'joined-up thinking'*. Indeed, the European Union trend is to talk of sustainable development policy making and planning as *'joined up'* or *'connected'* policy making and planning: that is, policy making and planning in specific areas, e.g., housing, economic development, environmental justice or 'green' issues, with an eye to its effect on policy and planning outputs, outcomes and frameworks as a whole. Warner's conclusion was that "while environmental justice seemed to be having an impact on

mainstream environmental organizations and on government agencies, this did not apparently extend to groups working on sustainability projects" (38). Backing up Warner's research, Portney (2003, p.57) argues that "most [U.S.] cities that have sustainability indicators do not explicitly use social or environmental equity."

Maybe they just 'get it' in the Bay Area? For example Urban Ecology, a local not- for-profit from Oakland says on its website that:

> *"Urban Ecology has not focused on the traditional environmental priorities of preserving land, air and water. Neither have we had a traditional community development focus aimed at, for example, generating affordable housing. Rather, our work has integrated elements of these disciplines and others, with healthy "human habitats" as the common denominator. We have sought to advance sustainability in the Bay Area using three main strategies -- alternative visioning, education and policy advocacy, with all of our work grounded in the three E's of environment, economy and social equity." (http://www.urbanecology.org).*

Healthy "human habitats" I would argue, can only be achieved through what I call *'just sustainability'*: "the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems" (Agyeman et al., 2003, p.5). Just sustainability prioritizes justice and equity in the development of sustainable communities, but, and fundamentally, does *not* downplay the environment, our life support system. Our present *'green'* or *'environmental'* orientation of sustainability is basically '*green washing'*: tweaking our existing policies and plans but not altering the capitalist economic mode of production. This orientation fits squarely within the heavily critiqued *ecological modernization* thesis (Hajer, 1995; Fisher and Freudenberg, 2001). On the other hand, *transformative* sustainability or *just* sustainability implies a paradigm shift which in turn requires that sustainability takes on a redistributive function, as Baxamusa argues in his paper in this volume. To do this, justice and equity must move to the center stage in sustainability discourses, if we are to have any chance of a more just and sustainable, as opposed to environmentally sustainable future.

Let me offer an example. Most cities in the global North emphasize firstly the *environmentally* friendly nature of their urban public transit schemes--their ability to get car drivers off the road and their ability to cut pollution loads – with equity issues being a lower priority. For example, in Germany, Mayor Beate Weber's '*Heidelberg City Development Plan 2010'* has the following key objectives: to reduce environmental burdens, create and preserve liberties, grant the same mobility opportunities to everyone and account for the special situation of persons with mobility handicaps, and reduce dangers and impairments. Equity issues are there, but unlike environmental issues, they are not listed first. By contrast, most mayors in cities in the global South, who have developed innovative bus rapid transit (BRT) schemes, such as former mayors Enrique Peñalosa of Bogotá, Colombia with its *Transmilenio*, or Jaime Lerner of Curitiba, Brazil, with its *Rede Integrada de Transporte*, emphasize the *equity* of such schemes. They note that car ownership and use in their cities is generally the preserve of the rich and exemplar BRT schemes such as theirs allow *access* to facilities and services irrespective of car ownership. As Peñalosa said, "Do you know what you can achieve when you cut the roads budget in your city and spend it on other, better things"? (Peñalosa pers. comm.) Peñalosa's point, like Baxamusa's, is one of redistribution. Indeed, I would argue that the reason why Bogota and Curitiba have become poster children for sustainable city development is precisely because they have focused on *redistributive/transformative* or *just,* as opposed to purely *environmental* sustainability.

So, how do the articles in this volume address facets of the paradigm of just sustainability as I've brie y described it above? Clearly I can't fully describe all the papers, but I'd like to raise three key and interrelated issues foregrounded by many of the authors, in addition to my points above about the redistributive nature of just sustainability, a point made by Baxamusa in this volume.

The first facet is the critical issue of spatial justice. Lasley argues that:

> "urban parks serve as community backyards, business catalysts and tools for a healthy population while adding nature to unnaturally paved environments. A just city should consider equal access to such municipal benefits as integral to policy. Louisville, Ky., is expanding park acreage and promoting healthy living under its City of Parks expansion policy. This study examines access to parkland by race and evaluates the expansion policy to determine if it improves access or exacerbates inequity".

Although Lasley argues that this access/accessibility issue is about *environmental* justice, I see this in wider context, as a case study in *spatial* (in)justice because, as British Member of Parliament (MP) David Lammy (2004) has argued "just as social justice requires that life chances are not distributed along class lines, spatial justice requires that they are not distributed geographically". As Lasley argues:

> "Louisville could set an example for other cities by expanding the park system in a manner that improves the lives of all residents...... The City of Parks plan, in its current form does little to improve accessibility to parks for minority residents."

I also think that the concept of spatial justice offers politicians, policy makers and planners a more robust, joined-up concept, one that, unlike environmental justice, they cannot ignore so easily.

The second facet is the issue of 'rights'. I am hearing all kinds of rights-based discourses associated with just sustainability: the '*Right to the City*' movement and discourse (Mitchell, 2003); the '*per capita environmental rights*' discourse surrounding the resource allocation concept of '*environmental space*' (Spangenberg, 1995; Carley and Spapens, 1997: McLaren, 2003; Buhrs, 2004); and the '*Greenhouse Development Rights Framework*' (Baer, Athanasiou and Kartha, 2007) to name but a few. In this volume, Osborne-Jelks evaluates the impact of urban sprawl on the right to city services, namely sewage delivery and wastewater treatment in poor communities in Atlanta while Lint looks at *Addressing Needs as Rights*. She examines a rights-based approach to development, through a case study of communities and dams in Cambodia and the struggle between development and community rights. She argues that:

> "The rights-based approach gives development practitioners opportunity for sustainable change by facing the difficult question of power. Development organizations need commitment to change, beginning from the very place they work everyday by supporting the voices of the poor and refraining from reproducing inequalities and social hierarchies. Development practitioners and their respective agencies must be accountable and transparent to network partners and communities to the extent they demand of the others. A rights-based approach enables this kind of accountability by encouraging partnerships with multidirectional communication, and sharing in decision making, planning and evaluation efforts of strategies"

The third facet is the role of art, or more broadly the role of '*creative industries*' and '*creative cities*' in helping us toward a just sustainability. Foster's paper cities Miles (1997, p.164) who argues that the role of art is:

> "... *to initiate a continuing process of social criticism, and to engage defined publics on issues from homelessness to the survival of the rain forests, domestic violence and AIDS, whilst its purpose is not to fill museums... but to resist the structures of power and money which have caused abjection, and in so doing create imaginative spaces in which to construct, or enable others to construct, diverse possible futures*"

While I'm not certain of any empirical work on the linkages, I think there are probably great commonalities between those cities that take their creative industries seriously and those that, to paraphrase my colleague Kent Portney (2003) are "taking sustainability seriously." One only has to think of overlapping creativity and sustainability initiatives in cities like London, San Francisco, Sydney, Vancouver, Seattle or Curitiba to see the point.

Again, it is my pleasure to introduce such a wealth of engaging scholarship. I hope you enjoy these papers as much as I did.

Julian Agyeman, Ph.D.

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