Where 'Top-Down' Meets 'Bottom Up': Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development

There is a growing recognition within the field of sustainable development that tackling inequality and building resilient communities is a vital and necessary precursor to a sustainable society (Baker 2006; Beder 2006; Jackson 2009). In addition to challenging economic growth, sustainable development theory openly admits the "penetration of Western environmentally destructive development models" (Baker 2006, p.3) as a key factor in the perpetration of poverty and inequity in the both within Western countries and in the global South (Kirkby, O'Keefe & Timberlake 1995). Tim Jackson's *Prosperity without Growth* report (2009) outlines '12 Steps To a Sustainable Economy', five of which specifically address issues of community and inequality: "sharing the available work and improving the work- life balance, tackling systematic inequality, measuring capabilities and flourishing, strengthening human and social capital and reversing the culture of consumerism" (2009 p.12)

However, it must be noted that current sustainable development discourse has very little to say about the pragmatics of bringing about cultural change. There are, perhaps, three main reasons for this discrepancy. First, a large part of sustainable development discourse leans closely to what Blowers refers to as 'ecological modernization', and seeks only reform the existing infrastructure without pro-actively challenging its core tenets, which may perpetuate consumption and thus exploitation. For example, whilst Jackson's 2009 report calls for the "tackling of systematic inequality" he makes no tangible political or economic recommendations on how this can be done, and fails to

address concepts such as 'climate justice' and 'ecological debt' which have the capacity to tackle systematic inequality with a justice- based approach. It is important to note that whilst sustainable development initiatives largely seek to reform existing structures from within, the environmental justice tends to be more oppositional, challenging the core tenets of the existing infrastructure[1] (Scandrett 2007). Scandrett observes: "Mainstream policy discourse has increasingly restricted [the operation of] environmental justice to policy areas which do not challenge [economic] growth." Second, as sustainable development is predominantly a top- down initiative, it lacks the capacity to effectively tackle core issues of community cohesion. However well- intentioned, approaches to tackling issues of community from the 'top- down' can often cripple grassroots community organizing by imposing artificial community structures using institutions. For example, the late social critic Ivan Illich (1973) identifies the increasingly 'institutionalized' nature of our communities as a factor in creating social isolation and decreasing neighbourly reciprocity. To illustrate this the American community development scholar John McKnight (1984) often tells the tale of 'the bereavement counsellor' in which a small village has an established system of dealing with death: when someone dies the members of the community go over to the house of the family in mourning to comfort and cook for them. The system functions on the 'grassroots' agency of the community in taking the initiative to do so. However, in order to 'guarantee' and homogenize this outcome, the village then hires a bereavement counsellor to comfort the mourning. The institutionalization' of this duty thereby removes from the community's initiative in dealing with loss (McKnight 1984), thus unintentionally fracturing initiatives towards reciprocity. This illustration implies that issues of community cohesion are perhaps best tackled with 'bottom- up' approaches, instead of the macro- level policy and economic reforms of sustainable development. A third reason that the practice of

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[1] This is not true of all environmental justice initiatives, especially 'top- down' environmental justice approaches, as Scandrett (2007) notes, critiquing two environmental justice research publications recently commissioned by the Scottish government. Scandrett observes that while both the 2005 publication by Fairburn *et al Investigating Environmental Justice in Scotland, links between measures of environmental quality and social deprivation* and the 2005 publication by Curtice *et al Public Attitudes and Environmental Justice in Scotland*, present thorough analyses linking social deprivation and proximity to environmental harms, both papers resist making recommendations that challenge the core tenets of a system that perpetuates the correlation.

sustainable development perhaps lacks the capacity to affect change within the core "social logic" of our culture is due to its rigidity as a discourse (McLaren 2003). As a higher- level policy oriented concept, whose very discourse was generated and perpetuated by international conferences (Baker 2006), its is inherently unable to be responsive to the fluid and localized events that drive cultural change from the bottom- up.

The environmental justice movement identifies strongly as a grassroots, 'bottom- up' approach- challenging the core tenets of a political and economic system that perpetuates exploitation and excess- consumption. Benjamin Zephaniah, a poet who famously turned down the prestigious OBE notes the importance of being able to maintain one's ability to be oppositional. "I don't want to do government or monarchy approved poetry. We need the freedom to be critical of these institutions, and once you become part of them, that's very difficult" (Zephaniah in Pool 2009).

To read the full research paper, including the bibliography, visit:
http://environmental-justice.com/wp-content/uploads/EJR.pdf

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