

Mapping the Movement for Sustainable Livelihoods

by Jeffrey Barber

While the rampant consumerism, competition, and mass media commercialism of modern postindustrial North-ern culture might be new historically, the movement towards sustainable livelihoods is not. Such practices have been well-known throughout the world's various cultural traditions. Jesus' question of "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the

whole world and lose his own soul?" is echoed by Lao Tzu's observation that "he who knows he has enough is rich," and the Buddha's insight into the suffering inflicted by the vicious circle of endless psychological hunger. As the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh points out:

Accumulating wealth and owning excessive portions of the world's natural resources deprives fellow humans of the chance to live. Participating in oppressive and unjust social systems creates and deepens the gap between rich and poor, and aggravates the situation of social injustice. Yet while tolerating excess, injustice, and war, we usually are completely unaware that the human race suffers as a family. While the rest of the human family suffers and starves, enjoying false security and wealth can only be seen as a sign of insanity.

The question is not only how to restructure society so that the overconsumers and underconsumers of the world are enabled and encouraged to seek and achieve sustainable livelihoods, but how to visualize what such a society might be like. From the viewpoint of the individual, each one of us would be continually learning "to be alive with each step." However, what kind of society and institutions would cultivate such movement and build the paths to be traveled by such citizens? David Korten explains:

For most of us, the topic of jobs brings to mind primarily images of people working in the plants and

facilities of the world's largest transnational corporations for which localities around the world are competing.

The term sustainable livelihoods is meant to evoke very different images of people and communities engaged in meeting individual and collective needs through the cooperative use of local resources in environmentally sustainable ways....As the unfolding image takes on ever greater definition, we may begin to discern an organizational structure that links the local with the global in a multi-level system of human habitats organized as continuously self-renewing, self-governing, self-reliant eco-communities. Household eco-communities might be clustered into neighborhood eco-communities, clustered into village eco-communities, and so forth, to the level of a global eco-community. A system goal would be to concentrate decision-making authority at local rather than global levels, with the result that those who make decisions would be more likely to bear their primary consequences and it would be more difficult for one group to pass the environmental or social costs of its decisions onto another group.

Communities and Societies Moving Towards Sustainable Livelihoods

While it is commonly said that there are no sustainable communities or sustainable societies, a number of places can be identified which have clearly been moving in that direction. Among the more well-

known examples is southern Indian state of Kerala. During the past few decades, Kerala has undergone an experiment in the use of radical reform as a development strategy that has brought it some of the third world's highest levels of health, education, and social justice. Among the causes identified for these successes are ecology, history, and people's movements. The radical reforms in Kerala are known for successes in their distribution of resources, including the public distribution of food, public health care, meaningful land reform, widespread literacy, and educational opportunities. The high level of social and economic equality engendered in this otherwise poor country is said to be responsible for comparatively lower rates of violence. "The near absence of violence against lower castes in Kerala," says Franke and Chasin, "is one of the most valuable lessons the state has to offer other regions of India."

In the Clinch-Powell portion of the Tennessee Valley watershed of southern Appalachia, a number of residents have been working to develop a system of sustainable livelihoods based on alternative forestry and community-supported agriculture. Designated by the Nature Conservancy as one of America's "Last Great Places," Clinch-Powell is the site of a network of regional citizen-action and environmental leaders attempting to find a sustainable alternative to the spread of rapid logging and clear-cutting and strip-mining threatening the ecology of the area. "We are family farmers and gardeners in southwestern Virginia and upper east Tennessee who provide fresh, chemical-free vegetable, fruits, and herbs to restaurants and to families," explains Richard Cartwright Austin. Other examples include Yodd, Senegal, Chattanooga, and the Mondragon cooperative in Spain.

In addition to the above locations, several efforts have been made to identify specific cases which best exemplify the values of sustainability and the advance of

sustainable livelihoods. Among these selected endeavors are President's Commission on Sustainable Development award winners; Right Livelihood award winners; and Habitat II Best Practices awardees.

Various initiatives have been launched with the goal of promoting or defending sustainable livelihoods including: General Agreement on a New Economy (GANE) for Full Employment, Equity and Environmental Sustainability; CAPSCAN (Consumption and Production System Change Action Network); and Ecovillages and ecocities networks.

Local Agenda 21 Campaigns are taking place in Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, France, England. In the United Kingdom, tens of thousands of people have become involved with a new process, developing a Local Agenda 21 for the towns, cities, or villages where they live.

The European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign began in May 1994 at a conference in Aalborg, Denmark. This campaign focused on Local Agenda 21, including debates on sustainable lifestyles and the role of local authorities in promoting these priorities represented in the Aalborg Charter. As of 1995, 131 European municipalities and over 250 national and international organizations, scientific institutes and individuals from 27 countries have officially joined.

Other contributors to models for this movement include The Climate Alliance, which began in 1990 as a covenant between European municipalities (about 440 as of 1995) and the indigenous peoples of the Amazon tropical rainforest area in Latin America (under the aegis of COICA, Coordination of Indian Organizations in the Amazon Basin).

Also, Friends of the Earth's Sustainable Europe Campaign began in 1995 and promotes the concept of "environmental space" in calculating national sustainable consumption and production targets.

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Other initiatives include Global Action Plan for the Earth (GAP); the Seikatusu Club in Japan; Development Alternatives in India; and the Mias credit movement pioneered by the Gramen Bank in Bangladesh.

Communities and Local Self-Reliance

Seeking to build sustainable communities and societies in order to provide sustainable livelihoods for all (in contrast to achieving "sustained economic growth" to provide jobs), civil society, forward-thinking local authorities, and socially responsible businesses are helping give birth to a new type of economy not considered by either cold war capitalism or socialism.

This new type of economy is rooted in both the local human community and the local natural community, thus drawing upon and investing in the regeneration of all three types of capital: market capital, natural capital, and social capital. Management of this investment thus roots itself in local ownership, stewardship, democratically accountable governments, and a politically active civil society which holds government accountable to the public interest.

Building a Movement

Building a movement for sustainable livelihoods cannot be accomplished in the traditional patterns of social movement building. The sustainable livelihoods movement is not so much a separate movement in competition or parallel with other social movements, but is rather a movement of connection and of a deepening understanding and practice within the existing environmental and social justice movements. In one sense, the concept of sustainable livelihoods is an important contribution to these international movements from the movements of the grassroots. It is a concept which links the struggles of the poorest with the crises of the affluent. As with the environmental justice movement, the concept of sustainable livelihoods helps build bridges between those concerned with the environment and those concerned with the plight of the human community, especially of women, indigenous peoples, the uprooted and vulnerable, and the world's poorest.

Underlying most of these individual movements is concern for the safety and quality of life of human beings. Increasingly, this "people-centered" concern includes the health of the community of life, the natural environment upon which both market and social economies and human survival depend. The relationship between humans and their environment, in both the areas of production and consumption, is one of the crucial areas of education needed to effectively link these groups and movements through a common understanding and commitment to sustainable livelihoods for all. ■

Jeffrey Barber is the Executive Director of the Integrative Strategies Forum. This piece is excerpted from his background paper, Mapping the Movement for Sustainable Livelihoods: Groundwork for Building Sustainable Communities & Societies, 1996 (commissioned by and available through CRLE).