

# **What is sustainable development - and where is it going?**

Hello everyone

My name is Diane Warburton. I work in Shared Practice, which is a partnership founded to research and develop creative sustainable solutions.

My own background is in public involvement in environmental and sustainability issues. I have worked mainly on research and evaluation projects, and have published two books and much else on sustainable development, but I have also been active in local environmental campaigns, especially on roads and traffic. Now I work mainly on how government and environmental organisations engage with citizens and communities through national programmes and projects.

I am delighted to be here today, to be part of this symposium - so many thanks for inviting me to be involved. Other speakers will talk about the current connections between art and sustainability. My job is to give some background to the idea of sustainable development, especially the environmental dimension, and to some of the ideas now taking hold in working towards a more sustainable world.

I will cover:

- What sustainable development is, and how the idea has developed over the years - with some thoughts on the tensions that have always existed even within the basic concept.
- Emerging themes of community participation and other different forms of politics around sustainable development (protest, consumerism, private sector initiatives).
- Where we are now - as sustainability campaigns are focusing as much on changing personal values, behaviour and lifestyles as on trying to change international policy.

## **Early environmentalism**

It has been said that the modern environmental movement began with Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962.

That book set a style that has been used again and again in environmental campaigning ever since - a mixture of language of lyricism and natural beauty and harking back to an earlier, simpler time, alongside hard science and independent research on the dangers and threats to that world.

Rachel Carson painted a picture of rural bliss, with a beautiful and abundant natural environment - the orchards, the blossom, the wild foxes and deer ...

"There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields.

In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of colour that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. The foxes barked in the hills and deer silently cross the fields, half hidden in the mists of the autumn mornings ...

She showed how that world was changed - the sickness and death, the 'stillness' with no wild birds or animals, the withered plants and trees ...

"Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death.

The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. ... There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example - where had they gone? ... The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These, too, were silent, deserted by all living things. Even the streams were now lifeless ...

And she showed how the industrialisation of farming, especially the use of pesticides and other chemicals had destroyed that world - and continued to poison the landscape, the wildlife and the people ...

"For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death. ... Residues of these chemicals linger in soil to which they may have been applied a dozen years before.

They have entered and lodged in the bodies of fish, birds, reptiles, and domestic and wild animals so universally that scientists carrying on animal experiments find it almost impossible to locate subjects free from such contamination ...

these chemicals are now stored in the bodies of the vast majority of human beings, regardless of age. They occur in mother's milk, and probably in the tissues of the unborn child. |All this has come about because of the sudden rise and prodigious growth of an industry for the production of man-made or synthetic chemicals with insecticidal properties."

Environmental campaigns ever since have used similar imagery: the peaceful landscape of plenty, with happy human beings going healthily about their lives in the midst of a rich diversity of plants and birds and trees - all destroyed by industrial processes where profit came before beauty, and with pollution and killing on a mass scale.

These positive images come from the 19th century Romantic painters and writers who cherished innocent pastoralism - alongside wilderness untouched by humanity.

The negative images, and the independent science that drives them, came from challenging the idea that governing institutions know best and that traditional science can be trusted to deliver the 'goods'. Industrialisation was shown as bringing 'bads' as well as 'goods', and bringing increasing uncertainty and risk into all our lives.

These remain the roots of environmentalism:

- The campaigns to 'save the whale' that used images of these remarkable animals in magnificent unspoilt seas were enormously successful in making people care about a species they would probably never see themselves - alongside statistics showing numbers killed and threats of extinction.
- Or images of magical tropical rain forests with millions of species of exotic plants and animals living in a harmonious ecosystem that had developed over millennia - alongside scientific evidence about the dangers of losing the trees that could absorb huge quantities of carbon dioxide (and help reduce global warming), as well as providing habitats for animals and essential resources and cultural meaning for the people that live there.

The environmental movement became a real force in global politics during the 1970s and 1980s, with memberships of hundreds of thousands for the main environmental organisations - in the UK certainly, they had much larger memberships than the mainstream political parties.

They could gain media attention and became extremely skilled at providing images and video footage of their direct actions to news services, who were only too glad to use such dramatic material.

This all began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which were a turning point for the environmental movement. The organisations became more established and it has been suggested that the mainstream environmental movement chose 'reform over revolution' by working within the political system, and cast off its radical roots.

The reasons for this change appear to be mixed. It may have been to protect their organisations, which had grown and become established - certainly, Friends of the Earth, one of the major international environmental organisations, withdrew from direct action on one road protest in the UK after legal threats to their assets. Or it may have been because the political climate had changed so they were able to get direct access to decision-makers, and actually began to have real influence on policy issues for the first time.

What are seen now as 'environmental issues' have some similarities and some differences with the early environmental movement inspired by Rachel Carson:

- **Similarities:** Toxic chemicals, forests, wildlife, oceans, pollution are all still important issues - but these all tend to be lower down the agenda
- **Differences:** The main issues now are climate change and global warming, waste and recycling, going green at home and work, anti-GM and pro-organic food, energy issues - especially anti-nuclear and pro-renewable sources of energy e.g. wind power, fuel poverty, sustainable consumption and production - all much more complex issues.

A good example of these new priorities is sustainable production and consumption. The argument is that if everyone on the planet were to consume natural resources and generate carbon dioxide at the same rate as we do in Europe, we would need three planets to support us (WWF). And we only have one. So a focus in many environmental campaigns is now on One Planet Living, and on sharing the resources we do have more fairly among the people of the world.

So environmentalists are looking at much more complex issues that include social and economic as well as purely environmental themes - the simplistic focus on whales and rainforests is still there in the imagery, but is much less important in the campaigns.

It may simply be that the environmental movement has 'grown up' and become more sophisticated. But these changes had close connections with the growing importance of sustainable development in policy-making, especially at international levels.

Sustainable development was first invented by three international environmental organisations - IUCN, UNEP and WWF - in producing the World Conservation Strategy in 1980. Although led by environmental bodies, sustainable development has brought challenges to environmental organisations:

- First, the concept of sustainable development is based on the idea that there is no such thing as a purely environmental problem. There are always political, social and economic implications as well.

Simplistic campaigns became less convincing as a more 'holistic' idea of the issues developed. Climate change and global warming, for example, have social and economic causes and consequences, whereas in the 1980s acid rain was blamed almost entirely on industrial processes.

- Second, sustainable development is based on the idea that development is essential to improve people's quality of life, especially to tackle poverty. Sustainable development is not conventional development - it needs a different 'quality' of development, organised differently, that takes environment into account but that is not the main aim.

In the past, much environmental campaigning had targeted development as the enemy of the environment, preferring a simpler more rural vision of the 'good life'. But that way of thinking is fundamentally challenged by sustainable development.

The reaction of the environmental movement to these challenges was mixed. Some (e.g. Friends of the Earth) declared that they had become sustainable development organisations. Others (e.g. Greenpeace) continue to focus on environmental problems.

All this has made a huge change to the way environmental organisations focus their work over the last 15 - 20 years. There is much less harking back to a golden age of rural living where everyone lived in a land of plenty.

Instead there is much more understanding that such a life has never been the experience of most of the people in the world, and that change and development are urgently needed to deal with the real problems of life in the 21st century - from over-consumption and polluting industrial processes, to terrible poverty, starvation and sickness for much of the world's population. Sustainable consumption and production have taken over from 'saving the panda' in the priorities of many environmental organisations.

And in spite of the difficulties for their environmental philosophy, sustainable development would never have become such an influential policy idea in international circles, nor would the environmental consequences of development and current lifestyles have become seen as so important, without the constant pressure from environmental organisations. It is largely thanks to them that sustainable development is still a very current idea.

I'll just take a few minutes now to give a brief history of how sustainable development became so central to international policy.

## The main events in sustainable development

1972

- The Club of Rome (an international group of scientists, researchers and industrialists) published their report called *Limits to Growth*, which directly challenged the conventional wisdom of the time that economic growth was the answer to the world's problems - before this, the argument was that by making more and creating more wealth, there would be more for everyone.

The Club of Rome argued that it was not possible to continue with infinite growth in a finite global system. The five areas they identified as of particular concern were population, food production, industrialisation, pollution and use of non-renewable natural resources. These remain among the basic issues underlying sustainable development.

- The UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm agreed, for the first time, the concept of the 'rights' of humanity to a healthy and protective environment.

Environmental issues were moving up the agenda, and were already challenging ideas of infinite economic expansion.

In 1980

- The Brandt Commission on North / South development made the connection between wealth in one part of the world and poverty elsewhere - a connection of responsibility if not of cause and effect. They argued for a different sort of relationship between the rich North (Europe, America etc) and the poor South (Africa, India etc).
- The World Conservation Strategy was published. It had been developed by three international environmental bodies - the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the United Nations Environment Programme, and WWF.

This was the first time ideas of environmental protection and social and economic development were linked: the Strategy aimed to "match superficially conflicting goals of development and conservation - development to meet human needs and conservation of the resources to safeguard them for future generations".

1983 - 1987

- As a direct result of the Brandt report and the WCS, in 19983 the United Nations launched The World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Commission), to debate sustainable development. Their report was published in 1987.

Their definition of sustainable development is still the one most commonly used:

"Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable - to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"

In 1992

- The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio. The conference launched Agenda 21 - the agenda for sustainable development for the 21st century.

This was the turning point for sustainable development. After Rio, sustainable development became the dominant discourse in international policy. Agenda 21 was inspiring and comprehensive, and supported by hundreds of world leaders.

The first paragraph of Agenda 21 says:

"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 the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being.

However, integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer more prosperous future. No one nation can achieve this on its own; but together we can - in a global partnership for sustainable development." (Agenda 21, paragraph 1.1)

There have been international policy statements and agreements before, but this felt different. It seemed to bring together the campaigns over decades by environmentalists and those working for international development to tackle poverty. Sustainable development was being seen by governments and by many campaigning organisations as the new intellectual framework for global development - in future development was to serve humanity - but not destroying the environment.

Agenda 21 was detailed and comprehensive. It had 40 chapters as well as new ways of working towards change.

The chapters covered:

- combating poverty
- changing consumption patterns
- human health
- human settlements
- protection of the atmosphere
- deforestation
- desertification and drought
- sustainable agriculture
- biodiversity (which is about the importance of biological diversity - the variety and mix of species of animals and plants in ecosystems)
- protecting oceans and freshwater
- toxic chemicals
- wastes, especially radioactive wastes

and also

- strengthening the role of 'major' groups (e.g. women, children and youth, indigenous people, workers and trade unions, non-governmental organisations - NGOs, business and industry)

and

- means of implementation (including technology transfer, science, education and awareness, capacity building, international institutions and regulations).

So, the roots of environmentalism remained in Agenda 21, and gave the whole thing a strong environmental flavour - there was still a strong emphasis on toxic chemicals, oceans, biodiversity and species conservation, waste and forests.

But there was also an emerging interest in 'how' change would happen, so that sustainability could be achieved. This included a new focus on creating different decision-making processes, involving 'major groups' and institutional arrangements, and much greater stress on public and citizen involvement.

What Agenda 21 did was to begin to place environmentalism within a wider world view - the environment was becoming integrated into the real political priorities of international institutions and national governments - economic and social development for the people.

After 1992, there was an immediate and extensive flurry of activity around the whole issue of sustainable development, in Europe, among global business and at national level:

#### **European Community**

- In 1992, the same year as Agenda 21 was launched, the 5th European Environmental Action Programme, called *Towards Sustainability*, was published.
- In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty was signed in the European Community. This introduced the word 'sustainable' to the formal aims of the EU.

The previous commitment to 'continuous expansion' was changed to 'sustainable and non-inflationary growth respecting the environment', and a Community objective was introduced as "to promote economic and social progress that is balanced and sustainable".

- The 6th European Environmental Action Programme, called *Environment 2010 - Our Future, Our Choice*, was launched in 2001. The title signals the shift from international policy leadership - onto much more focus on what individual citizens, businesses and national governments can do.

#### **Global business**

- In 1995, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development formed as a coalition of 125 international companies from 30 countries. WBCSD has since developed industry strategies on mining and cement (by and for the industries themselves).

Also in 1995, over 50 leading insurance companies signed a 'Statement of Environmental Commitment' in recognition of the dangers to their industry of climate change. This has been a very influential lobby, especially in the UK and the US (where industry seems to be ahead of government on these issues).

#### **National strategies and Local Agenda 21**

- By the mid-1990s, most industrialised countries had published national sustainable development strategies. The UK published its first one in 1994; the latest one was last year - 2005).
- By 1997 it was estimated that 3,000 local governments in 64 countries had LA21 activity (LASALA 2001).
- In the UK, it was estimated that 98% of UK local governments had completed a Local Agenda 21 by the end of 2000.

Many of these Local Agenda 21 initiatives involved local communities, especially in 'visioning' ways that sustainable development could be achieved in their localities, and in drawing up local plans.

The United Nations also continued to develop agreements and strategies within the sustainable development framework:

- **In 2000, a United Nations summit agreed the Millennium Development Goals**, with a target to reach the goals by 2015 - mainly social but also with three goals on environmental sustainability. The aim of these goals was "to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of abject poverty".

The Millennium targets are mainly social and economic, especially around halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty i.e. living on less than \$1 per day; to reduce child deaths by two -thirds; to halve the number of people who suffer from hunger; to give all children, everywhere, a full course of primary education.

The three goals on environmental sustainability - related to integrating sustainable development into country policies, reversing the loss of natural resources (forests, biodiversity, energy use, carbon dioxide emissions etc), access to safe drinking water and improving the lives of slum dwellers.

- **In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development** was held by the United Nations in Johannesburg. This was designed to celebrate ten years since the launch of Agenda 21 in Rio.

After this, the UN agreed "to adopt sustainable development as a key element of the overarching framework for UN activities, in particular for achieving internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, and to give overall political direction to the implementation of Agenda 21 and its review". And for sustainable development to be taken into account in all plans for reform of the UN.

- In January 2005, and announced at the WSSD, the **UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development** was launched, to be led by UNESCO.

The concept of sustainable development has become seen as complex, but it became clearer through all these international agreements - mainly by constantly repeating certain themes and issues so they have become better understood as a coherent set of ideas.

The first ideas of sustainable development used to be expressed through three circles:

[diagram]

This definition has become more sophisticated over time, and there are now basically six elements to sustainable development:

- **Meeting human needs**, especially tackling global poverty
- **Equity**, with aims to achieve more equitable standards globally, with greater fairness and social justice in global developments within and between countries.
- **Environmental constraints / limits**. The idea that the Earth's natural resources are finite, and so human beings must learn to live within the physical constraints of a finite world, and within the limited ability of ecosystems to adapt to change.

- **Futurity.** Ensuring that actions taken today do not reduce the ability of future generations to meet their needs - the idea of inter-generational responsibility.
- **Democracy.** Developing appropriate governance, political, judicial and administrative systems to achieve sustainability, and especially to involve citizens and stakeholders more.
- **Local to global.** Working locally and globally, to create impacts locally and globally on issues of local and global significance.

This then is the official picture of the development of the concept and policy of sustainable development. But there is a general consensus that, since 1992, the momentum has been lost.

Overall, the sense of the meta-narrative - the 'big story' - that was sustainable development seems to have got lost along the way, even though all the right words are in place in international agreements and strategies.

But the sense of creating a different sort of world that was initially seen as implicit in the unifying concept of sustainable development has been lost to a large extent. And the world is not becoming more sustainable:

- Some countries are still getting poorer, especially in Africa
- Carbon dioxide emissions and other pollution levels continue to increase
- The problem of managing waste from increased consumption is becoming a crisis in Europe
- Wildlife and plant species continue to become extinct, and
- Climate change is becoming more obvious and dangerous every day as extreme weather conditions are now commonplace (hurricanes, flooding, heatwaves), and affect the poorest people in the world most.

We have reached an odd plateau in the sustainable development discourse, and it seems that has created the space for some of the really basic issues to be addressed again.

The most basic of these is the question about the extent to which sustainability can be achieved within current political and economic systems.

Some very diverse views on where we go next are emerging:

- **New capitalism.** Jonathan Porritt is head of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, and former Director of UK Friends of the Earth pressure group. His new book *Capitalism as if the World Matters* argues that, although radical change to the existing model of capitalism is needed, capitalism can be the vehicle for sustainable development, and that sustainability can be encompassed within existing political and economic systems.
- **Too late.** James Lovelock, on the other hand, has called his new book *The Revenge of Gaia*. Lovelock developed the idea of the earth as a self-adjusting ecosystem - a single living entity - that he named after the Greek Mother Earth goddess Gaia. This theory essentially sees the earth as having a self-defence mechanism that will (or has already started to) deal with threats to its survival (e.g. pollution). His view is that we are entering a new 'hot age' in which human civilisation will almost certainly not survive. He argues

that pollution has already gone too far, so - for example - we may as well invest in nuclear power to meet human needs for energy in the short term, rather than waste time trying to develop new technologies to use energy from renewable sources such as wind.

- **Alternative lifestyles.** At the other end of the scale are those who are trying, in less profile ways, to live their own lives in more sustainable ways. These groups are varied, from professionals continuing to work in their previous jobs but live in low energy houses, grow some of their own food and share transport, to those who live very simply off the land and live in shelters they build themselves from the most basic of materials. What these people have in common is the belief that a radical re-shaping of political, economic and social systems is necessary to move humanity towards sustainability.

Community-led initiatives have some features in common with alternative lifestyles - but are much more about how the public, citizens, communities become involved in sustainability in the current world. They have become much more important in national and international policy programmes recently, but they have always been a central part of the thinking around sustainable development.

### The importance of participation

- The Brundtland Commission argued that the *very first* requirement in the pursuit of sustainable development was "a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making" (WCED 1987, 65). They recognised that:

"The law alone cannot enforce the common interest. It principally needs community knowledge and support, which entails greater public participation in the decisions which affect the environment.

This is best secured by decentralising the management of resources upon which local communities depend, and giving these communities an effective say over the use of the resources. It will also require promoting citizens' initiatives, empowering people's organisations, and strengthening local democracy" (WCED 1987, 63).

- Agenda 21 and European policies have also included references to the importance of public involvement:
  - Agenda 21 recognises that successful implementation of sustainable development is "first and foremost the responsibility of Governments", but it also argues that "*the broadest public participation ... should also be encouraged*" (Agenda 21, 1.3).
  - "Activities that will contribute to the integrated promotion of sustainable livelihoods and environmental protection cover a variety of sectoral interventions involving a range of actors, from local to global, and are essential at every level, *especially the community and local levels* ... In general terms, the programme should (a) *Focus on the empowerment of local and community groups through the principle of delegating authority, accountability and resources*" (Agenda 21, 3.5).
  - "Sustainable development must be achieved at every level of society. People's organisations, women's groups and non-governmental organisations are important sources of innovation and action at the local level and have a strong interest and proven ability to promote sustainable livelihoods. *Governments, in co-operation with appropriate international and non-governmental organisations, should support a community-driven approach to sustainability*" (Agenda 21, 3.7).

- The European Commission's 5th Environmental Action Programme said: "The strategy for achieving sustainable development can be really successful only if the general public can be persuaded that there is no alternative to the action proposed. Therefore the public *must be informed* about the issue and means for protecting the environment and, crucially, *involved* in the process" (CEC 1992, 7, original emphasis).

The growing importance of citizen and community participation has been reflected in very different styles of campaigning by the environmental movement.

- **Consumer power.** Environmental groups have increasingly used campaigns urging people to use their individual 'consumer' power - such as encouraging consumers to refuse to buy GM foods in supermarkets.

This was hugely successful in convincing supermarkets not to stock them, reducing the market and thus the incentive for farmers to grow GM crops (alongside lobbying governments at all levels, and taking direct action - certainly in the UK - by destroying fields of GM crops).

- **Collective community action.** Some organisations have focused on working with community groups and local organisations to, for example, improve housing estates or get training and job opportunities in deprived urban areas in Western European countries, or access to health and education in less developed countries, helping groups to articulate their needs to decision-makers, and to demand the changes and services they need.
- **Mass protests.** Anti-globalisation mass protests, like those around World Trade Organisation international summits in Seattle in 1999, and then in Genoa, and the much more relaxed Make Poverty History campaign in 2005, mobilised millions of people across Europe.

These have taken a different approach again. Here a whole mix of different interests came together very publicly and with great anger to protest against global injustice and environmental destruction.

Some of these campaigns have been important and influential, and have certainly let governments know that people actually do care about these issues. But they also raise some difficult questions for movements for change:

- how much do successful mass campaigns like these reflect shifts in attitudes by governments and the public, rather than change people's minds?
- how much are these environmental organisations simply mobilising existing concerns, rather than offering new ideas and challenges to the current state of unsustainability?
- how far can international environmental and other organisations go before they are no longer acceptable to governments and so put their own constraints on protests and campaigning - and how much can they work with governments before they lose their independence and thus their ability to represent another view?

These are current issues. Organisations in the UK are already openly balancing getting and keeping public support on important issues, and negotiating with government.

## Where is sustainable development now?

Sustainable development is now at a very interesting stage:

- **The international policy rhetoric is good.** The right ideas, principles, sentiments are all there at these levels. Campaigners need to keep up the pressure to make sure they don't disappear, that promises are delivered on, and that improvement continues, but the battle of principle has largely been won.
- **Business is developing new initiatives to behave more sustainably.** There are some fascinating new developments by business that go far beyond simple environmental or corporate social responsibility reporting.

These initiatives are often led by big international companies that have to do business in highly-regulated European markets (and some part of the US). They actively seek strong regulation in some cases, because it is much easier and cheaper for them to apply the same standards worldwide as they do in the most heavily regulated regions. They want a level playing field so everyone else has to invest as much as they do in environmental measures, reporting, community relations.

This is not a universally positive story. Some companies will lobby to minimise regulation on the one hand, while seeking universal regulation on the other. They will avoid compliance as much as possible, while calling for maximum compliance of their whole industry. But there is a continuing trend for big companies to be leading some very surprising developments. Just a couple of examples:

- **The World Business Council for Sustainable Development's** Cement Sustainability Initiative is run by and for international cement companies. It was set up by 16 international companies, representing more than half the cement production in the world, outside China.

In recent years, they have produced guidelines on emissions, climate protection, fuels and raw materials, health and safety, and local impacts on land and local communities. None of this is required by international legislation, but using the guidelines will help companies meet regulations where they exist and set standards where they don't.

- **A sustainable city in China.** Arups is an international civil engineering consultancy that has started work with Shanghai Industrial Investment Corporation to create a new sustainable city (Dongton) as a model of an eco-city for China's growing urbanisation. All the planning, urban design etc is based on integrated management systems for water, energy and waste) and on minimising the Ecological Footprint. Carbon dioxide emissions will be offset and sustainability principles will be held to.
- **Sustainable design of new products.** This is the area of work in which my partner in Shared Practice, Nigel Ordish, is the expert. Some companies, small as well as large, are now looking at sustainability principles in the design, production, transport, use and disposal of their products - often to meet increasingly strong European legislation, but also because many designers are finding that ideas of sustainability are stimulating new design ideas - rather than being a constraint.

- **Development and environmental organisations have become established players in international policy**, including being members of international institutions. Some see this as co-option and selling out. Others see it as an inevitable result of building successful major organisations with real influence with governments and others. Either way, this battle of principle has also been won - the environmental and development organisations are in positions of power and influence, and are taken seriously at every level from local town councils to the United Nations. Not everywhere, and not enough, but they are there.
- **Anti-globalisation movements and protests** are also becoming highly effective in many ways, especially at disrupting what may otherwise be 'cosy' negotiations among the richest countries, these movements have seen many of their principles recognised - at least in theory - by mainstream media, established academics, etc

This all leaves what were once radical environmental organisations in a difficult position. No-one is saying that everything is fine - not with climate change and global warming an ever greater threat, half the world's population living on less than \$2 dollars per day, and global inequality in which the world's richest 500 individual people have a combined income greater than the poorest 416 million people.

But there is a growing feeling that maybe the methods of getting change need to change. These organisations have campaigned for years on matters of principle that are now mainstream international policy - at least in theory.

All the old methods of protests, campaigns, demonstrations, mass organising may still be needed, but so is something else.

The 'something else' that is emerging has a very different flavour. It is much more personal, more local, more based in everyday life as it is actually lived. It has been labelled 'authenticity' and that is part of the character is what is happening. Not a media-spun construction, not celebrity, but something 'real'.

The Slow Food movement that started in Italy is a good example. Initially this was a reaction against the McDonald-isation of the world, the poisonous, environmentally destructive fast food culture that makes people obese and sick. Slow Food offered a radical alternative based on good quality, locally grown, seasonal food grown with few or no chemicals, well-cooked and eaten in relaxed, personal, social situations that supported people's personal and social relationships.

### **New sustainability initiatives**

There are many other initiatives around the world that have social, economic and environmental benefits to the people doing them and to the wider society:

- projects that create economic development through practical improvements to degraded landscapes, creating jobs, developing skills, regenerating disadvantaged areas and changing their image and attractions to residents as well as investors (e.g. Groundwork)
- projects to insulate people's homes to reduce energy consumption and tackle fuel poverty, also providing again jobs and skills training as well as tackling a major environmental problem (e.g. the WISE group in Scotland and National Energy Action in England)

- housing developments that aim for zero carbon emissions during construction as well as when the houses are lived in, often also with innovative water-saving features, reed-beds to clean waste water for re-use, shared transport facilities (e.g. car-sharing) etc (e.g. Hockerton Houses)
- new farming methods that support local economies by sharing labour and skills and resources (e.g. collecting and sharing seeds, and jointly marketing and distributing food directly through new networks), do not use expensive chemical pesticides and so reduce external costs and enable greater self-sufficiency alongside providing safe habitats for birds and other wildlife (e.g. Norfolk organic farming networks)
- new technologies that enable the sharing of design and technological innovation to develop and support local production of essential goods and products to create local work, maintain distinctive local cultures and skills, and reduce road transport costs and emissions
- community-run projects to generate energy from renewable sources (e.g. coppice, or hydro / water, or others), giving local benefits including reduced energy costs, secure local energy supplies, and reduced demand for centralised power stations using fossil fuels (that create carbon dioxide contributing to global warming) or nuclear power (that create radioactive waste and security threats (e.g. Community Renewables Initiative in England).

Hockerton Houses, in the English midlands, is a good example of some of these, with housing designed to have zero carbon emissions, energy from renewable sources, reed beds to treat waste water so it can be re-used, organic food growing, shared transport and many other similar ideas. Innovative projects like these are still very much on the margins of mainstream development, but they are no longer seen as beyond everyday life.

### **What does sustainability look like?**

Part of the difficulty with sustainability is that no-one really knows what a sustainable world looks like. We can recognise unsustainability easily - 2 cars to every household, increasing energy use based on coal or oil or nuclear power, cutting down irreplaceable rainforests to plant soya to feed cattle, exploiting the poorest people to create goods so cheap that families in the west no longer bother with laundry and simply buy more.

Sustainability is not so easy to recognise, partly because it will not stand still. What seemed sustainable 20 years ago may not be now - we have other priorities.

So the new approaches to thinking about sustainability start with that sense of constant change, and are based on ideas of new forms of learning that can change people's attitudes and behaviours, encouraging a sense of personal responsibility for unsustainable behaviour as well as demanding rights to a healthy environment, and getting involved in collective actions at local and global levels.

These ideas come together in some of the most interesting current thinking in sustainability.

This starts from the idea that there is no solution that can simply be taken off the shelf that will always be the right answer.

So the focus has to be on helping people find new ways of adapting constantly to a changing world, and that fit their own local and personal circumstances.

The environmental movement is now putting a lot of effort into thinking about how people behave, why they behave in the ways they do, and how to change that - to tackle unsustainable global consumption and production.

## **Working with people**

I have been doing a lot of research recently into how and why people change their lives, for an experimental project on sustainable consumption and production. We have found that the key is likely to be working closely with people at local level - rather than just focusing on international policy. We are now testing these ideas with three communities in southern England.

Our research has shown that providing information - however hard-hitting and scary it is - will not work.

One survey in the UK (WWF, 35) found that:

- 80% felt well-informed about the environment and what they could do to help with environmental problems
- only 7% actually did all the things they knew about; about 45% did little or nothing.

People know what is the right thing to do, even to improve their own quality of life, but they don't do it. People simply refuse to connect their own behaviour with a world they don't like.

All the trends in Western societies are about increasing consumption, about having more, driven by a lot of very powerful interests (media, companies selling products etc etc). The challenge now for the sustainability movement is how to tackle those powerful trends.

Behaviour change alone is not enough. Traffic measures that restrict car use on certain days or in certain places change behaviour, but as soon as those traffic measures are removed, people go back to their old habits. What is needed is some way of changing people's minds so that they no longer want to go back to their old habits.

The focus now is on working with groups of people to explore how they can develop more sustainable lifestyles that benefit them as individuals, their communities, and the wider world - following the six principles of sustainability identified earlier. The aim is to find out how values can be shifted, so that there is permanent change to attitudes and behaviour.

The theory is that people change through social interactions, through working together on problems that they share. It has been shown that people learn best from each other, from those they respect.

These ideas tend to be based on the assumption that positive human values - such as not wanting to waste resources, not wanting to hurt others, not wanting unnecessary costs - will win out through such collective working. But there is also a recognition that people do need more information about how sustainable their life choices are in terms of environmental impact - targeted information designed to solve specific problems rather than general information broadcast at everyone.

This is all very new and experimental, but seems like a very exciting way forward. It is working with people as social beings, and it is about working with a very different approach to sustainability.

In this approach, environmental and sustainability organisations work with people to help them define their own sustainable lifestyles and ideas about a sustainable world, rather than imposing a model designed by someone else from somewhere else. In this way, the thinking goes, people will have invented their own futures and will have a different sort of commitment to it.

### New sustainability thinking

But sustainability thinking in these terms has focused mainly around the intellectual and the political - the spiritual and aesthetic has been largely ignored.

Where the old environmental movement knew the benefits of reaching people's hearts as well as their minds, the new sustainability movement has failed to reach people's hearts. People know they should care, but they actually don't - and if they don't care, the world will never be changed.

This is the enormous gap that a symposium like this can begin to tackle.

- How to link the great potential in people's real experiences - the 'authenticity' of real life - with the global challenges that face everyone?
- How can creative thinking contribute to the picture of what sustainability might look like?
- How to make the connections between seemingly overwhelming global environmental problems, and people's own wellbeing and happiness?
- How to help people connect what they know is right, with doing the right thing?
- What can really reach people's hearts so that they begin to make the sorts of changes - in their own lives, in their communities and in their political choices when they elect their governments - that will begin to move towards a sustainable world?

I am very much looking forward to hearing ideas from other people here about how contemporary art can contribute to answering some of these questions.