



*An article from
Catholic Rural Life Magazine
Fall 2002 volume 44 number 2*

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT-SOCIAL CONCERNS OF THE CHURCH

Robert Gronski, Ph.D.
Rural Life Policy Coordinator
National Catholic Rural Life Conference

This coming September, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, will bring together thousands of participants, ranging from heads of state and national delegates to members of non-governmental and civic society groups. This global summit sponsored by the United Nations is meant to focus the world's attention on difficult social and environmental challenges facing everyone in the 21st century. The participants are expected to decide on a global plan of action that will improve human lives in this generation and conserve natural resources for the next. Is that possible given today's fractured world?

During the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro ten years ago, the international community also attempted to adopt a global plan of action for sustainable development. There were great expectations then, and some well-considered strategies emerged. Yet the best strategies are only as good as their implementation. The Johannesburg summit this year presents another opportunity for today's leaders to adopt concrete steps and identify quantifiable targets for socio-economic development. The affluent North and the poorer nations of the South are negotiating a new paradigm for a fair and sustainable use of resources. It may be worth a few moments to review the progress of the North-South dialogue over the past few decades. If patterns are evident, for better or worse, then there is a greater chance to effect change in a realistic manner. Only then can a faith-based organization like the National Catholic Rural Life Conference join in such discussions and contribute to a better future.

The "Institutionalization" of Development

In the early 1970s, a Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, Sweden, was recognized as the first international summit organized by the United Nations in response to growing disparities between the industrialized North and developing South. Third World cities had become overcrowded as people migrated out of rural areas and into industrializing centers. Poverty, insufficient housing, lack of clean water, communicable diseases -- these were common problems facing newly formed governments with limited resources.

[SIDE BOX]

There has been a growing realization in national governments and multilateral institutions that it is impossible to separate economic development issues from environment issues; many forms of development erode the environmental resources upon which they must be based, and environmental degradation can undermine economic development. Poverty is a major cause and effect of global environmental problems. It is therefore futile to attempt to deal with environmental problems without a broader perspective that encompasses the factors underlying world poverty and international inequality. (Our Common Future, p.3)

During the same year as the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, a study called *The Limits to Growth* was released by the Club of Rome (1972). This study used computer models to predict environmental change based on social and economic factors. Environmental activists were alarmed by this report -- it forecasted the depletion of resources and mass starvation if current population growth rates continued. Societal changes and "green revolution" technological advances prevented mass starvation from sweeping across continents, but no one can deny that poverty and environmental degradation still cover the earth. The limits to growth report initiated an understanding of the interconnections of world resources, population and the environment.

The debate on sustainable development began to turn on the structures within which the drive to sustainability takes form in the contemporary world (R. Smith). Formal international gatherings like the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment created the *institutionalization* of the problem of environmental disruption. In other words, sustainable development would have to be explicitly managed, presumably by development "experts". If nation-states came up lacking, then it was up to an international structure to deal with these concerns. Prior to environmental problems, a mechanistic scientific perspective had already set the course for a nation's development. Big, industrial processes were favored over local, appropriate technologies. Science, technology, industry and bureaucracy -- the four horsemen of economic rationalization -- continued to frame the solutions to the problems they created.

[SIDE BOX]

The 1972 Stockholm Declaration proclaimed the solemn responsibility of governments to protect and improve the environment for both present and future generations. After the Stockholm Conference, nation-states began to recognize the legal right to an adequate environment and the obligation of a government to protect that environment. This is reasonable and would go without question if it were not for the predominance of "technocrats" and "experts" who would assume the institutional power to manage sustainable development.

Our Common Future

"In the middle of the 20th century, we saw our planet from space for the first time."

So begins Our Common Future, a 1987 report by the U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development. Led by Gro Harlem Brundtland, former prime minister of Norway, this 21-member

international commission studied the question of development over three years, then proposed "a global agenda for change" for achieving sustainable development by the 21st century. It is telling that they chose the image of "spaceship Earth" as an opening reference. As seen from space, our blue-lit swirling orb would not reveal the "three worlds" that existed then on the face of the Earth. The first world was the industrialized Western countries with free market economies; the second was industrialized East bloc nations with centralized economies; and a "Third World" covered most of the Southern Hemisphere in a pale of poverty. These developing nations had emerged out of a colonial past and still struggled to build political, economic and social structures that worked for the mass of people.

Seen from space, Earth is truly one world. There is one atmosphere, virtually covering the planet like a light cloak; there is but one all-connecting web of life that sustains us. Within this web of life is a mystery that allows human beings a freedom to create, to enrich and to transform. Yet there is a legacy of baseness to our humanity; we get mired in social, cultural and political divisions. National economies may appear to globalize and create interdependencies among nation-states, but the dark side of market forces leads to disgruntlement and anger among classes of people. The human population, caught between ethereal space and material reality, is simultaneously connected and fragmented, held at once in fragile communion and forever tearing ourselves apart.

The United States, as the lone superpower, professes to lead the way in political freedoms and economic growth. But serious questions can be raised about America's leadership, such as when they pass on global environmental treaties or unilaterally pursue an aggressive trade agenda, all in the name of freedom. There is also a question about the American way of life, which many of us would hesitate to raise in this patriotic time. The amount of resources used for the American standard of living would require, according to some, the material abundance of three earths to fulfill the needs of every human being alive today. If Americans say they feel lucky or blessed, then we may be feeling the wrong thing. In the end we are judged not by our possessions, but our by charity.

Therefore, the question about sustainable development is, first, how to share the Earth's resources -- land, water, minerals, air, energy -- so that all people can attain a life of pleasing sufficiency. As described above, the international community has asked this question in their global forums dating back to the 1970s. But there is also a second part to consider, a question of *interior dimension* to sustainable development: How do we develop our human "being" along with our human "having"? Indigenous people, civil society and environmental groups have raised this question each in their own way. Faith-based groups also address this social concern, and certainly the Catholic Church has something important to say, when confronting the structures of industrial growth gone amuck. The challenge is to bring a moral discourse into an institutional forum; the challenge is counter a global structure of corporate giants with a global solidarity based on sustainable rural communities.

The Importance of Being There

At the same time as the institutionalization of development, important contacts began between international government organizations and a new body of groups emerging in response to persistent development and environmental problems -- non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The increasing involvement of NGOs

within international institutions and conferences is an important shift in the structure of international environmental politics over the past two decades.

It is now standard at international conferences for NGOs to hold parallel meetings. The scale of involvement by NGOs was clearly seen in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. According to an article in *Environmental Politics*, there were 1,400 accredited organizations in the UN preparatory meetings for Rio; 15,000 NGO representatives attended the parallel meetings during the Summit (R. Smith). Similar numbers are expected at the upcoming Johannesburg Summit, as well as the U.N. World Food Summit to take place early June in Rome. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference has applied for accreditation as a faith-based NGO to both these summits. Our voice, if we expect to be heard, will need to resonate with other voices calling for social and environmental justice in a world out of balance.

Our message must be focused as well, and our strength lies in advocating for family-based agriculture that cares for rural communities and cares for Creation. In a word, this is sustainable agriculture. Will this resonate with farmers and rural development groups in other countries? Based on my travels and work experiences in Asia and the Pacific, I can attest that this will be resoundingly appreciated. To many people overseas, America stands for bigness, big machines and highly capitalized industries. A North American group like the National Catholic Rural Life Conference calling for smallness, appropriate technology and local control would appear as it is, an anomaly. But it is anomalies that occasionally change the way things are.

The idea of sustainable agriculture is the antithesis of the "green revolution". In the developing world, the green revolution was supposed to solve the problem of hunger by increasing agricultural inputs and raising production. This strategy, however, could only be implemented among farmers who had access to good soils, irrigation and other substantial assets. In time, the green revolution served to marginalize much of the rural population, actually decreasing their access to croplands, grazing lands, and water supplies (Horne and McDermott).

Sustainable agriculture in contrast means stewardship of both natural and human resources. This includes a social concern for the living and working conditions of farm laborers, for the health and safety of consumers, and for the needs of rural communities. James Horne and Maura McDermott make this clear in their book, [The Next Green Revolution](#) (2001). They lay out an indictment against "industrial agriculture", which is the dominant North American system and the one exported to developing countries by U.S. corporate, academic and political structures. According to Horne and McDermott, industrial agriculture endangers the essential natural resources of soil, water and life, thereby jeopardizing the future productivity of agriculture and the inheritance of our children. Industrial agriculture hooks farmers on fossil fuels, and the fertilizer and pesticides made from them, while downplaying the consequences of overusing such products. Industrial agriculture desolates rural areas by bankrupting farmers and ignoring the well-being of rural communities, thus leaving them open to exploitation.

Horne and McDermott believe that the next green revolution will actually be a trio of revolutions: agricultural, ecological and social-economic, all entwined. "The real change that agriculture needs is, at its heart, social change. How society views food, farmers and natural resources must change." (Horne and McDermott,

p.258) There is more to say about this change and the principles of sustainable agriculture. But let's continue with a review of sustainable development -- what it means in minds of some, and what it may mean at heart.

Meeting Needs, Accepting Limits

Sustainable development, according to the World Commission on Environment and Development, "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The Commission clarified that this definition contained two key concepts: (1) The concept of "needs", in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given. (2) The notion of "limitations" imposed by the existing state of technology and social organizations upon the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. Whether developed or developing, market-oriented or centrally planned, all countries must set their goals of economic and social development according to these terms of sustainability.

Although the World Commission on Environment and Development may have thought beyond any narrow sense of physical sustainability, subsequent international agendas seem unable to stay true to social equity between and within generations. Does it not appear, though, that the two key concepts of "needs" and "limitations" are closely aligned with the virtues of *charity* and *temperance*? The first is a unique form of love that reaches out to those who are poor and marginalized. The second carries the notion of moderation, perhaps to the point of abstinence, in order to moderate our personal habits by a healthy discretion. The fruits of these virtues are peace, joy, balance and friendship, which lead us to a profound definition of sustainable development that is grounded in solidarity.

In the same year as Our Common Future, Pope John Paul II issued an encyclical on the social concerns of the Church, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 1987). In this encyclical, he addressed the question of development in a world not only split by wealth and poverty, but fraught with Cold War tensions. Whereas these tensions have taken on a different tone since that time, the pope noted other painful wounds in the world: the phenomenon of terrorism and disrespect for the cycles of nature. His main concern, however, was an urgent call for solidarity and an option for the poor by affluent nations, clearly noting that the gap between rich and poor nations was widening and that such a gap also existed within nations.

An enduring teaching in *Sollicitudo* is John Paul's insistence that many of the shortcomings plaguing the world derive from "a too narrow idea of development, that is, a mainly economic one" (15). Solidarity goes beyond global economic interdependencies. "Solidarity helps us to see the 'other' -- whether person, people or nation -- not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical capacity to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our *neighbor*, a *helper*, to be made a sharer on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God" (39).

Overcoming the Structures of Sin

The encyclical confronted the excessive availability of material goods for the few, drawing attention to the dire effects upon the environment when the resources of nature are used selfishly and wastefully. This is the encyclical that is known for the phrase "structures of sin". The Holy Father spoke forcefully against the dominant institutional structures, generated by thirst for profit and power, which harm poor nations by

manipulating economic and social mechanisms. In no uncertain terms, he said that economic and political decisions hide idolatry of money, ideology, class, and technology. The solution is an intentional international ordering to serve all peoples of the world.

In writing *Sollicitudo*, John Paul wanted the economic planners and development experts to look up from their five-year plans and examine the obstacles to development through a moral lens (McGurn). Authentic development is fundamentally tied up with "solidarity", the love and service of one's neighbor. Rather than divide the world into rival economic blocs competing for resources, development goals need to realize that the goods of the earth are destined for all.

Sustainable development, then, is not so much a plan of action as it is a process within the human environment. It is a *moral dynamic* and it finds its energy in human solidarity. The principle of solidarity, also articulated in terms of "social charity," is manifested in the effort for a more just social order (Catechism, #1940). "Socio-economic problems can be resolved only with the help of all the forms of solidarity: solidarity of the poor among themselves, between rich and poor, of workers among themselves, between employers and employees in business, solidarity among nations and peoples. International solidarity is a requirement of the moral order; world peace depends in part upon this." (Catechism, #1941)

World Summits: Search for Balance

The language and lessons coming forth from *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* are important for gatherings like the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio and the upcoming 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. The challenge of alleviating poverty should not be separate from confronting the waste of consume-and-dispose economies. Development of the human environment is a moral dynamic that plays out on the common ground of limited resources and a sacred space of solidarity and charity.

In retrospect to the 1992 Earth Summit, global attention was brought to bear on the understanding that the planet's environmental problems are inseparable from economic conditions and problems of social justice. Social, environmental and economic needs must fall into balance in order to reach long-term sustainable outcomes. The Earth Summit revealed two truths: (1) If people are poor and national economies weak, the environment will suffer. (2) If the environment is abused and resources over-consumed, economies will decline and people will suffer. The summit also stressed that the smallest local actions or decisions, good or bad, have potential worldwide repercussions.

As a matter of note, then President George Bush made clear at the Earth Summit that the American way of life was not up for negotiation. Whether or not he said this to protect American jobs during an economic downturn, the watching world perceived this as another act of American arrogance and selfishness. Then along comes another American politician who states: "We must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization." So wrote Al Gore in his 1992 book, *Earth in the Balance*. He argued that only a radical rethinking of the human relationship with nature could save the earth's ecology for future generations. If environmentalists were thrilled by Gore's treatise, they also had to be disappointed by the subsequent lack of rethinking during the Clinton-Gore years.

Given the Titanic-like political economic structure in place, it is no wonder that a modern society like the United States cannot easily turn the ship of state towards "a radical rethinking of human relationship with nature", regardless of whatever mammoth obstacle we find approaching. Bearing in mind the political realities of the world, yet holding in our hearts the moral dynamic of solidarity, it is time to set a course for a new way of acting. If that is too ambitious, then let us agree on the outlines of the next green revolution. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference favors these rural development goals for the 21st century: adequate and accessible food supply at the local level; stable and profitable livelihoods for farm families and rural communities; and widespread ecological health. The challenge remains to bring these community goals into global policy forums.

Land, Agriculture and Food Security

Over the past decade, NGOs and civil society groups have become better organized and their movements stronger overall. They continue to challenge the political will of governments which talk the right talk, but often fail to implement plans of action benefiting the common good. NGOs also confront governments and global corporations in their attempts during international forums to push through "hidden agendas" that favor unrestrained markets over the prudent limitations. The neoliberal mantra that "the free market will feed the world" is in fact no guarantee of local food security at all. Trade liberalization creates food insecurity when local food systems are deliberately dismantled according to global trade regulations.

The upcoming Johannesburg Summit will allow the following "Major Groups" (identified in agreements during the 1992 Earth Summit) to be fully recognized at the policy level of discussions. These groups are worth highlighting:

- farmers
- indigenous peoples
- workers & trade unions
- business & industry
- non-governmental organizations
- women
- local authorities
- youth
- scientists

Leading up to this year's summit, these major stakeholder groups have held dialogue sessions at regular intervals to raise awareness, build broad consensus and mobilize preliminary resources to achieve critical objectives. Their main focus is on access to resources for sustainable agriculture and rural development, closely aligned with a global campaign on fair conditions of employment in agriculture. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference is joining these groups as one of the NGOs and relaying our social concerns within the dynamism of this multi-stakeholder alliance.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference knows by experience that diverse groups acting in harmony can change national agendas. Over the past year, a Farm Bill Campaign by family farm, civil society and faith-based groups has garnered programs of sustainable agriculture and rural development in the Senate

version of the farm bill. This campaign continues to press upon Congress the basic principles of an economically viable, environmental sound and locally managed agricultural system.

Only a Beginning

The growing involvement of local groups in global forums is only a beginning. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference is aware of the work ahead of us and the challenge to keep our members abreast of these issues, local and global. In the end, it is our common efforts carried out in everyday habits that will eventually create the future we leave in peace to the next generation. I take inspiration from the words of Wendell Berry, and offer them as a closing reflection:

We and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another ... Our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land ... As we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone ... Our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other.



National Catholic Rural Life Conference
4625 Beaver Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199
(515) 270-2634
email address: ncrlc@mchsi.com
website: www.ncrlc.com

This article was published in the spring 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life[®]. No portion of this article may be reproduced without written permission from The National Catholic Rural Life Conference. To purchase the spring 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life, please contact The National Catholic Rural Life Conference office at 4625 Beaver Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199, call (515) 270-2634, or e-mail NCRLC@mchsi.com. The cost is \$2⁵⁰ an issue plus postage and handling.

End Notes

Berry, Wendell (1977). *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. Sierra Club Books; San Francisco.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994). Catholic Book Publishing Co., New York.

Gore, Al (1992). *Earth in the Balance*.

Horne, James E. and Maura McDermott (2001). *The Next Green Revolution: Essential Steps to a Healthy, Sustainable Agriculture*. Haworth Press, Inc., New York.

McGurn, William (1993). "The Turn Toward Enterprise: Sollicitudo Rei Socialis" in *Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism and Catholic Social Teaching*. Eds. George Weigel and Robert Royal; Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI.

The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought (1994). The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN. (Sections on "solidarity" and "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis".)

Pope John Paul II (1987). *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concerns of the Church).

Smith, Richard J. (1996). "Sustainability and the Rationalization of the Environment." *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 5(1):25-47.

World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press, New York.