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As if the world matters

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The Task

We live in a world where, according to Jeffrey Sachs in *Time Magazine* (March 2005) more than 20,000 people die each day because of extreme poverty.

But the question before us today invites us to look beyond the eradication of such poverty, which has many causes, to a more fundamental, systemic reality. The terms used are inequalities and opportunity. Our focus is therefore on the gap between the resource rich and the resource poor, between those with almost unlimited life chances and those with relatively few life chances.

I endorse the implied suggestion that while poverty elimination is necessary and desirable, it is an insufficient goal. Anti-poverty strategies which remain simplistically linked to neo-liberal models of development through growth and a consequent “trickle down” effect may provide charity but often overlook equity concerns.

It follows that the challenge before us in that little word “how”, which leads our assignment, is to come up with policy ideas that are social justice strategies requiring radical changes which, in the *words of Kofi Annan*, “break with business as usual”.

If our focus is on reducing the gap between those who have access to the resources which nurture human well-being and those who are severely disadvantaged, in brief, how do we picture this gulf of inequity? So as the elite affluent expand their repertoire of luxury holidays, endless gadgets, exclusive entertainment and celebrity or executive salaries, an underclass of more than a billion live each day on the brink of absolute destitution. (According to the new Economics Foundation in 2005 “between 1990 and 2001 for every $100 worth of growth in the world’s income per person, just $0.60 found its target and contributed to reducing poverty below the $1-a-day line”.)

In 1960 the income gap between the fifth of the world’s people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest countries was 30:1. By 2000 it was close to 100:1. In between is a group of three to four billion who may be described as the “managing poor”. Of course the picture is more complex than these statistics convey, and part of that complexity is that the inequity gulf is in evidence within nations as well as between nations.

Adding to the picture is the fact there is a connection between inequalities and reduced opportunities on the one hand, and degradation of the biosphere and the natural environment on the other. (The world presently has 25 million environmental refugees, a figure that could escalate dramatically under the effects of global warming.)

The greatest ecological damage is generated by the societies of the affluent minority, as might be anticipated given the disproportionate consumption of natural resources including non-renewable energy in our societies. To take the question of greenhouse gas emissions - the so-called developed regions of human society are responsible for six times more emissions than in developing regions.

Given this reality about consumption patterns and the vulnerability of the Earth’s life systems, what then of the challenge to reduce inequalities and enhance opportunities?

It would be unsustainable to aim at global social justice by replicating the use of natural resources and the lifestyle
of the one-fifth affluent world, because it would take three to five planet Earths to achieve. This is the massive constraint in considering the question before us. Moreover, as many voices from the nations trying to catch up with industrialisation have rightly said, it would be unjust to deny the poorer world the benefits Western societies have in abundance as a result of industrial-technological advances delivered substantially via growth-driven economies.

Here is our dilemma: how do we achieve global sustainability with social justice? Actually I want to use another term for that combination, eco-justice. Eco-justice will not result from replicating the patterns of economic growth in the past 50-60 years - that is unsustainable. Nor can it be by retaining existing social and economic arrangements - that would not reduce inequalities or enhance opportunities.

Any credible answer to the question before us must recommend instruments for the redistribution of wealth and social capital.

The wisdom of Thomas Aquinas almost a millennium ago comes to mind: “Whatever a man (sic) has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance” (or the words of the bumper sticker that appeared just a few decades ago, “Live simply so that others can simply live”.)

But we are urged here to be a little more hard-headed than these pieties might seem. Jonathon Porritt in his recently released book, Capitalism as if the world matters, is a guide. I concur with his conclusion that capitalism as we know it (in its neo-liberal, American-led, narrowly-based, poorly-regulated, predominantly financial-market-capital sense) cannot deliver sustainability with social justice.

I am also attracted to his arguments that a reframed version of capitalism premised on the five capitals - natural, human, social, manufactured and financial - might deliver something approximating eco-justice. I acknowledge that conceptualising this new economy, communicating it and winning political acceptance for it is a huge task - but, in my view, it has to be named.

That said, today, in our quest for policy ideas we cannot assume the full implementation of a reformed capitalist world order as if the earth matters where development is for all people and “bound by the limits of nature herself rather than the limits of technology and consumerism” (to quote Mikhail Gorbachev).

The missing link - an ethical vision

If the strategies we articulate are to take root and make a difference, those who advocate and implement them need a sense of meaning, purpose and understanding as to why they matter. Of course the empirical evidence of the tragedy which threatens life on Earth and the human species is one part of our motivation, a matter of enlightened self interest.

That said, most of the relatively affluent might well take the view that in our part of the world we can avoid most of the worst effects of the forecast doom. (After all we have the military might and superiority in many areas and in any case it will be future generations who will have changes forced on them, not ours.)

This suggests that part of the package in winning the hearts and minds of our contemporaries has to be an ethical vision which articulates in some detail the assumptions that lie behind our mission: (to reduce inequalities and enhance opportunities). Those assumptions are:

1. that “all of life is interconnected” and therefore the human agenda on global and local socio-economic issues must always be placed within an eco-centric approach; and
2. that all wealth is common wealth, to be shared for the common good and preserved for future generations of all beings.

I acknowledge that this ethical vision can be expressed in various ways but as an advocate of the Earth Charter Initiative I find its expression of eco-justice comprehensive, challenging and potentially a basis for practical changes. Indeed as a local citizen I would urge the governments of Queensland and Brisbane City which are sponsoring the Earth Dialogues event to adopt the entire Earth Charter as a guide for sustainability and social justice best practice.

The Earth Charter’s Part 3, “Social and Economic Justice”, addresses the question before us specifying four principles:
- eradicate poverty as an ethical, social and environmental imperative;
- ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner;
- affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity;
- uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of Indigenous peoples and minorities.

Moving to strategies

In fact the 14 sub-principles which are contained within this part of the Earth Charter provide key starting points for the strategies for which the question before us searches. I have added them as an appendix to this paper. In may be appropriate for us to endorse them as part of the outcome of this discussion.

The Earth Charter is also an indicator for so-called “Third Generation Rights” which nation states could be encouraged to adopt to expand the traditional civil and political rights to such matters as “the right to a healthy environment and essential natural resources”.

Then the eight UN Millennium Goals provide a framework for intervention which address inequalities. Programs derived from three of the goals are particularly important for enhancing opportunities - 2. achieve universal primary education; 3. promote gender equality and empower women; 5. improve maternal health.

I would also propose that enhanced attention to human population control measures delivered sensitively is a pre-requisite in achieving the outcomes our question suggests. The closer global population numbers approach the projected 9 billion plus, the harder it will be to address inequalities and enhance opportunities as well as to minimise threats to the natural environment.

We should also consider a package of recommendations that may facilitate significant global redistribution of wealth. Why could we not benchmark a global minimum wage as a way of restraining the global exploitation of labour and the undermining of communities? Measures such as progressive taxation, income transfers, subsidies, elimination of user fees for social services, public works programs and land reform within all nations should be encouraged rather than discouraged by bodies like the IMF.

Then we need to re-examine the resources devoted to military expenditure. The preoccupation with security needs to be subjected to an eco-justice audit. The environmental and social justice challenges facing the global community are ultimately and immediately more critical than the wretched violent disputes between protagonists. In any case the solution of these conflicts may be linked to measures aimed at eco-justice.

So to keep some proportion about this, ways must be found to divert some of the $1 trillion dollars currently being spent globally and annually on armaments (almost 60 per cent by the US) to address inequalities and enhance opportunities for all. There would be some impact if every dollar spent on the military were matched by a dollar aimed at ecological sustainability and social justice.

As Australians it would be refreshing to have a national proposal to introduce death taxes for estates above a certain value with that revenue devoted to environmental programs and those that reduce inequalities in other parts of the world. I also propose that Australian governments and others use the ecological footprint idea to quantify consumption patterns that conform to eco-justice. This could be a prelude to establishing benchmarks and targets (perhaps supported by an international convention à la Kyoto) to arrive at appropriate consumption levels.

In all this we are hampered by the lack of adequate global governance mechanisms tied to the global ethical vision we have outlined rather than simply to the global market place. Their development, beginning with strengthening support for the United Nations, is a priority if we are to make much headway.

Perhaps this wish list will provoke discussion. To make progress in these directions leadership within our communities is essential. I regard that as a personal responsibility but I also believe it is an obligation on our political leaders as well as through key culture forming institutions, such as religion and education. The question is: we may have the words but do we collectively have the will to make a difference?
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