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Sustainability and Equity: Strategies for Resilience

I am often asked to speak to people about sustainability, and especially about the relationship of sustainability and equity.

In a nutshell, here is what I say:

I describe sustainability as three nested glass vessels – like a Dale Chihouly blown glass creation. Environment is the outer glass basket. Within that, two additional fragile vessels are nested. They represent our human economies and our human communities. We can break our vessels from within, or

they might be shattered from outside, but they are all bound together. Our task is to learn to live mindfully and carefully within our limits and with each other so that we do not destroy any of these.

Most people understand the idea that there is no economy – no business to be done – on a dead planet. For reasons that planners should understand better than any other profession, many people just do not understand what equity has to do with this. As consequence, many people who address the topic of sustainability do not think about or include equity, making sustainability into a two-way talk between environmentalists and business people. They do not understand why communities matter, why race matters, or why poverty matters.

I tell them that equity matters to sustainability because we are so interconnected by our environmental life support

systems that we cannot afford to make poor communities or communities of color into human and environmental sacrifice zones. I say sustainability is about intergenerational equity; we cannot discount the value of future lives in the decisions that we make today by taking all of the benefits for ourselves and leaving all the costs to be paid by future generations. I say (quoting Carol Browner, former Director of the Environmental Protection Agency) that the best decisions are made by those who have to live with them. That is why we need to have public participation. Finally, I say that history is important to understand the position that we are in today, and no ethical action is possible without clearly acknowledging why we are as we are today. I wrote (in a volume of essays that included the Dalai Llama, both popes, Desmond Tutu and Barack Obama)

the only way forward lies in abandoning a time-bound sense of right and wrong. We must make amends for

wrongs to the earth and to the people who abide there for wrongs that degrade them and us, even if the one terrible wrong we committed was to enjoy the fruits of wrongdoing.

Then I read your code of ethics.

Ethics: AICP Code of Ethics: Aspirational principles

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- a) We shall always be conscious of the rights of others.
- b) We shall have special concern for the long-range consequences of present actions.
- c) We shall pay special attention to the interrelatedness of decisions.

d) We shall provide timely, adequate, clear, and accurate information on planning issues to all affected persons and to governmental decision makers.

e) We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence.

f) We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.

g) We shall promote excellence of design and endeavor to conserve and preserve the integrity and heritage of the natural and built environment.

h) We shall deal fairly with all participants in the planning process. Those of us who are public officials or employees shall also deal evenhandedly with all planning process participants.

I recognized that your work places you into daily contact with the challenges of sustainability, and your aspirations place you into a tough position: how to transform our communities for the future we know will come. You see the data that confirm impacts on communities, human and otherwise, from a host of conditions. That knowledge is an essential first step in any ethical course of action: we must first acknowledge what is happening where we are. We might not like where we are, but denial and despair lead to futile and dangerous acts. Somewhere between denial and despair lies a true account from which we can build resilience.

This is the challenge sustainability poses for you as planners; your knowledge carries with it a responsibility to

equity. That duty is based upon unequal access to vital information, and the ability to understand information. It is our duty to tell and make accessible what we know, but that can be “inconvenient” and unpopular.

1. Sustainability requires resilience; resilient ecosystems, a resilient economy and resilient communities. We must cultivate our understanding of resilience in all three contexts.

Resilience is the capacity to withstand the challenges that we know will come. We know beyond a reasonable doubt, some of the matters that are headed our way:

- Climate change, we have to stop destroying the system that our lives (and all life) depend upon
- Urbanization:

- i. By 2030, 60% of the world will be living in urban settlements
  - ii. 84% of developed nations will be living in cities
- Multi racialism:  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the population of the US is a non-white “minority” and that number is growing. The non-Hispanic White percentage (66% in 2008[5]) tends to decrease every year, and this sub-group is expected to become a plurality of the overall U.S. population after the year 2050.

In the US, history has left a legacy of unequal distribution of public services, exposures to hazardous wastes, and access to benefits of clean environments, employment, health care, and education. Sustainability inevitably requires that we address systemic and entrenched inequalities. This is not just social justice revisited because damage to earth life support systems are now critical and drive the need for change. This is one of



the most difficult truths that we know: human economic activity is destabilizing the environmental forces we depend upon for all life. There is no business on a dead planet, and there is no future in dead and dying communities. This is a powerful contemporary reason propelling us toward equity.

## 2. Cities and Towns are the Future of Sustainability, not the enemy.

In 1970, the Environmental Protection Agency was formed by President Nixon. Under that leadership, environmentalists intentionally disengaged the issues of civil rights, poverty, and cities.

Early environmentalists created a mental paradigm that was anti-urban and implicitly classist and unconsciously racist (except perhaps for an exaggerated idealization of Native American people). This paradigm was expressed in concerns

for endangered species but not for endangered people or communities. It was expressed in the anti-immigrant messages from major environmental groups. It was and still is expressed in the anti population groups who focus on birth rates in the lesser developed countries. This paradigm paints cities as parasites on agricultural lands and people, sources of waste and pollution. Cities are viewed as producers of filth, and density is associated with mental unbalance. This paradigm leads to demonizing cities and their inhabitants who are disproportionately people of color.<sup>1</sup>

Statistics on urbanization make it clear that this negative paradigm is unsustainable. We must embrace urbanization and explore ways in which it can preserve wild areas and

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<sup>1</sup> See, Collin, Robin Morris and Robert W. Collin. "Environmental Reparations for Justice and Sustainability," in *The Quest for Environmental Justice Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*, Robert Bullard, ed., (Sierra Club Books, 2005). Online at <http://www.environmentaljusticerc.cau.edu/SummitPolicyExSumm.html>. See also, Collin, Robert W. and Robin Morris Collin. "Urban Environmentalism and Race," in Marsha Ritzdorf and June Manning Thomas, eds. *URBAN PLANNING AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY: IN THE SHADOWS* (Sage Publications, 1997).

improve quality of life and resilience for all beings. Urbanism is the new hope for human sustainability. Urban sustainability will force us to face the still unresolved issues of past inequity in the distribution of public services, fire, police, sanitation, education. Those inequities have only gotten worse in the intervening 40 plus years. See the recent reports by the Urban League and Coalition of Color here in Portland.

Resolving these issues will require equity planning: acknowledging and resolving the lingering heritage of inequality that has left some communities and some people exposed to hazardous waste and toxic conditions and deprived of the benefits of access to nature.

3. Building that capacity for resilience is not only a matter of equitable disaster planning and equitable relief provision when disaster does strike. It is also about

changing unsustainable systems and structures that threaten our environment, our economies, and our communities.

Planners see and know what has happened to the land, and the land cannot lie. It bears the imprint of oppression on its face. You cannot help but see the scars. While the Human Genome Project established that race is a social, not a scientific, construct, History has also ensured that our mental paradigms are exquisitely attuned to race as a determinant of social costs and benefits. Collaboration for resilience and sustainability must include people and communities that have been excluded to their physical and economic detriment by past development.

Every environmental challenge is local in nature; participation and cooperation of local “stakeholders” are the

dispositive element in implementing sustainability. Every community has its culture (as complex as that is), and no implementation of sustainability is possible without embracing (not just engagement) of that culture. Capacity building for community engagement includes the likelihood that communities will have distinctive views and demand incorporation of those distinctive elements into any plan. This requires working through the face to face social networks of each community and not reliance on technology, from barbershops to nail salons to churches and the newspaper (The Skanner).

4. Collaborative Processes for land use planning must include sustainability and environmental justice perspectives now.

Lack of notice, inclusion and consent are Environmental Justice concerns about environmental decisions. If it sounds familiar, it is. Exclusion and injustice were the problems with racial segregation in housing and employment, access to public funds and public places. While delay and defiance may have thwarted justice in those areas, the environment is non-negotiable.

Unsustainable actions discount the value of future lives; all the benefits go to those around the table, and all the burdens and risks will fall on those too young to be around the table or not yet born. Unsustainable actions also discount the value of the lives of other contemporaries by allocating risk of harm to those politically weak and vulnerable people without notice. This kind of decision-making creates sacrifice zones that undermine the resilience of ecosystems, economies and communities.

Sustainable decisions expand environmental public participation and share power. They require cultural competence in public outreach and implementation. They require competence in assessment of benefits and burdens, including body burdens of our most vulnerable and exposed populations. These are the analytical tools of Environmental Justice.

5. “soft” collaboration emphasizes procedural aspects of inclusion: notice to affected people, outreach to affected stakeholders. “Hard” collaboration will require right outcomes forged in the heat of overcoming a history of inequity: inequitable provision of services Fire, police, sanitation, education that lingers on in our urban lands

More than soft collaboration is required now because of the desperate state of our environmental life support systems. Sustainability that replicates a history of exclusion of people of color and poor people draws a color line between sustainability and environmental justice that is not sustainable. There can be no sacrifice zones in nature, or in a sustainable future. We are no stronger than our weakest link.

## 6. The Oregon Environmental Justice Task Force

The Oregon Environmental Justice Task Force was established by statute in 2007. Its mission has been engaged to engage fourteen Oregon Natural Resource Agencies to incorporate Environmental Justice into the agencies' work and to increase Oregon citizen access to decision-making through a public engagement processes. The task force is composed of voluntary citizen representatives acting in good faith to



address Environmental Justice in collaboration with agency appointed Citizen Advocates. I was its founding chair, followed by Robert W Collin, a lawyer/planner/social worker (and my spouse).

Of many significant milestones, the most significant has been in identifying and incorporating environmental justice into agency institutional culture and core functions. This partnership-based collaboration worked despite a lack of funding by embracing the distinctive culture of each agency as we worked together to identify and begin to internalize how environmental justice touched their daily work. For this effort, we won the 2010 National Achievement in Environmental Justice Award from the EPA.

In closing, as planners, I urge you to address impacts on communities.

- I urge you to think about creative ways to address problems of access: digital, distance, class-based and employment-based disconnections from opportunities to participate and educate.
- I strongly urge you to build community capacity to participate in environmental decisions by helping to build community based organizations that can collaborate with you to do this work. Watershed councils are an existing model, as are innovative ideas like community watchpersons.
- I strongly urge you to address the separation by race of sustainability and environmental justice issues. Environmental Justice is a triage system, forcing us systematically to address the most injured communities and areas first, regardless of their political power. Communities must not be ignored in solutions to environmental and energy issues whether they are

logging communities, coastal communities, communities of color, or urban communities.

- I urge you to embrace cultural difference as an exciting transformative approach to building sustainability into management of land resources. I know there are several examples at this conference. For example, 3:45 pm - 5:15 pm First Foods Management Speaker: Eric Quaempts, Director, Department of Natural Resources, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

## 7. Closing Reading from Moral Ground

. . . . We are so interconnected -- by transportation, communication, viruses (real and virtual), by the cycles of life that define us -- that to imagine we are somehow

separated is delusional and leads ultimately to illness.

Our future depends on this recognition.

In the past, we have made decisions that control how we, and you, live. We imagined that our choices were in our best interests, in the best interests of the majority of us living. We understood that there would be sacrifices – winners and losers – but we winners were not the sacrifice zones. Others, outsiders, poor people, people of color, children, might be incidental casualties or collateral damage in the competition we imagined life to be. We believed that we could survive and not consider the sacrifices of the silent and the voiceless. We are rationalizing creatures – humans. We are the only creatures that lie. We invest our desires and impulses with reason – the fig leaf for desire. Our powers of reason can betray us all when we want to believe what is not true or good. There is one great truth teller, and she cannot

lie: Nature, the Womb into which we were born. She is the repository of all, our bones and the true history of our communities.

Not all of us believed that the greatest good for the greatest number was the course of justice or even truth. Even those who started out thinking that could not maintain the fiction of indifference to poverty and degradation. We had a future to think of, in common. That made all the difference for some of us.

Perhaps it will make the difference for all of us.

Thank You for your kind invitation.