

Seminar on Renewable Energy, Food, and Sustainability

January 2008

Summary of Facilitated Discussions

Tuesday, January 8

Definitions of Sustainability

This was a 15 minute group exercise looking at different definitions of terms related to sustainability. The goal was to encourage participants to critically reflect on different perspectives of sustainability and the assumptions inherent in different definitions. Different definitions were presented and then discussed by the group.

Sustain

- to give support
- to provide for the support or maintenance of
- to cause to continue
- to bear up
- to prevent from sinking away
- to endure

Develop

- to change the form of
- to become visible
- to open up
- to go through a process of natural growth, differentiation, or evolution by successive changes from a less perfect to a more perfect or more highly organized state.

Definition One

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising future generations to meet their own needs - *World Commission on Environment and Development*

Participant reaction to this definition focused on how many of the terms were very generic and open to interpretation. Specific terms included need and generation. The group discussed the differences between need and want. The term generation was discussed as having assumptions about class. In this definition, social conditions aren't explicit.

Definition Two

Sustainability is a concept, a goal, and a strategy. The concept speaks to the reconciliation of social justice, ecological integrity, and the well-being of all living systems on the planet. The goal is to create an ecologically and socially just world within the means of nature without compromising future generations. Sustainability also refers to the process or strategy of moving toward a sustainable future. – Janet Moore

[Moore, J. (2005). Is higher education ready for transformative learning?: A question explored in the study of sustainability. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(1), 76-91]

Participant reaction included appreciation for the definition not being limited to just humans, but to other beings. It was noted that the last sentence of the definition could be more rigorous and should hold us to a higher expectation (that we should achieve a sustainable future, not just make progress). It was also noted that in some contexts (such as rural communities) sustainability is equated with survival. Restoring and rectifying past mistakes should also be a part of sustainability.

Definition Three

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT = WORLD GOVERNMENT = LOSS
OF SOVEREIGNTY = NO CONSTITUTION = LOSS OF FREEDOM = NO AMERICA
(<http://www.middletonca.com/SUSTAINABLE-DEVELOPMENT-DEFINITION.htm>)

Participant reaction included discussion of world wide decision making and the difficulty in doing this well. Sustainability should also mean embracing cultural contexts and not rejecting them.

Wednesday, January 9

Facilitated discussion on Energy Issues

This was a 30 minute group debriefing in which participants were encouraged to reflect upon and share what they found most important, valuable and surprising about the information presented during the day's sessions.

1. Ethanol issues– there are 20 different subsidies for the manufacturing of ethanol. There is research available on policy related to this issue. The current situation regarding energy issues was compared to the energy crisis in the 1980's. Some participants questioned the ability of corn-based ethanol to impact CO₂ levels.
2. Education about issues related to energy and conservation is a necessary component of solving these types of problems.
3. Electric cars – the technology is available. One of the problems is developing a system of regulating energy usage whereby use levels won't necessitate the development of new nuclear or coal plants. Also a new system of collecting taxes for maintaining highway infrastructure would be needed.
4. Green building standards should be applied to new construction and infrastructure.
5. Conservation is a tough sell. People associate it with a reduced standard of living. One way to reframe this is to talk about a reduction of consumption. Still, making progress in this respect will require the involvement of the government. Countries who's governments have raised taxes and cost of energy, so usage is lower than the U.S. Reimbursements for energy-saving initiatives would be one way to help address this issue.

6. Conservation needs a champion. This isn't an issue in the presidential election, the current administration isn't supportive. A champion who can reach people at all levels is needed.
7. Carbon taxes and trading are one tool that could be utilized to encourage conservation

Dialog on Policy Issues Evening Session

The dialog on policy issues was a two –hour event in which participants discussed needed policy actions at a variety of levels: individual, community, state/tribal, national, and global. The event began with opening remarks from Josh Svaty, District 108's representative to the Kansas Legislature, and former Kansas governor John Carlin.

Representative Svaty discussed the history of energy policy in rural areas. Prior to the creation of rural electric cooperatives (REC), there was experimentation with sustainable energy sources, such as wind power. These activities largely ceased with the institution of RECs. Svaty views consumption of energy as one of the main issues. Despite increased efficiency of electrical products, consumption of electricity keeps rising. Possible policy solutions include the realization that energy isn't cheap and that we need to start paying more for it. Also, the public needs to understand the relationship between actions to conserve energy and their impacts on its cost.

Governor Carlin discussed the need for changing the public's perception of the importance of addressing sustainable issues. He discussed the need for experts once viewed as extremist, such as the Land Institute's Wes Jackson, to move to the mainstream. He doesn't view policy and politicians as the drivers to solving these problems. Research on how to adapt and change to address future conditions is a necessity, as is broad-based public education. Taking a whole-system approach to addressing and resolving current and future crises is vital.

Following these remarks, participants spent time in small groups discussing needed policy actions. After spending time in small group discussion, the participants reconvened to share their group discussions and continued discussing policy needs. The following statements are a summary of this discussion.

- We need to remember to include less developed countries in issues of sustainability. Addressing poverty and social justice on a global scale is an important factor. As these countries develop, it needs to be done in a way that sustains them over the long term. Establishing model communities in all parts of the world will help us understand how sustainable communities can work in a variety of settings. Money for development projects doesn't always get to the local level. Funds are also very small and aren't able to address the problems.
- We also need to elect leaders who will address these issues. The more questions we ask of elected leaders and the more communication we have with them, the better. These do help. We need to not only vote, but continue to be involved in the political

- Developing a global consensus on how to address sustainable issues is imperative.
- Funding needs to be targeted toward universities to help solve problems.
- Education is critical, it needs to start at a very early age. Also, teachers need to be educated on these issues. Education also should start at home. Intergenerational teaching and the wisdom of our elders needs to be encouraged. Education is a global need. There is a disconnect in our children. They need to be encouraged to spend time outside and yet we expect them to care about the environment. Reflection and critical thinking are key components to perspective change.
- Americans think of our selves as leaders and seekers of social justice. We need to find ways to motivate Americans to include or view sustainability as a part of social justice. Role modeling may be a way to do this. We are responsible for a lot of the problems, so we should be leaders in this.
- Population is a factor that doesn't get much attention. There was debate as to whether this is a current problem or a future threat.
- Transportation issues can be addressed in many ways. We should encourage biking and/or walking when ever possible; carpooling should be utilized and publicized in communities. Public transportation in smaller cities, such as Wichita, should be better developed. At KSU, driving through campus should be curtailed, and solar panels should be installed on all buildings, LEED certification should be required for all new buildings. More recycling should occur. Paying more for utilities should be explored. City planning and design can be modified to encourage a lot of these ideas.
- Local food buying is something people are willing to do, if its available. KSU can play a role in encouraging a system of local food to be developed by the state.
- There are good models for accomplishing and building on past successes. A lot of these were developed by taking a whole-systems approach. Incentives and rewards can help stimulate adoption and use of new methods.
- Methods of communication and networking should be developed, even within communities and for events such as this conference.
- Individuals matter a lot, but they need to work together to make change happen. Action needs to happen at all levels, individual through global.