



Charting a road map to a sustainable future: Making critical choices

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In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation...

- Great Law of the Iroquois¹

A couple of years ago, when KAIROS launched a consultation with its members and partner networks to set priorities for program work, climate justice and ecological sustainability were pressing issues for everyone, everywhere. “In the global South, climate justice was seen to have direct relationships with trade patterns, crushing debt, conflict, ecological migrants, poverty and cultural change.” This was echoed by Canadians who clearly understood that climate justice in the global North required of us a change in our lifestyles and patterns of consumption and the creation of more sustainable economies worldwide.

Climate change presents a challenge to our modern notions of infinite progress and is a grave reminder that there are ecological limits to human activity. The 2009 Global Humanitarian Forum report, *The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis*, states: “Every year climate change leaves over 300,000 people dead, 325 million people seriously affected, and economic losses of US\$125 billion. ... The international community agreed at the beginning of the new millennium to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty by 2015. Yet, today, climate change is already responsible for forcing some 50 million additional people to go hungry and driving over 10 million additional people into extreme poverty.”²

Addressing climate change, therefore, is not only a political challenge, it is a moral imperative that underscores Jesus’ call to reconciliation and healing with and among all who dwell on this earth.³

From the start of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, Euro-Western civilization embarked on a journey of rapid economic growth based on the exploitation of fossil fuels (first coal and later oil) as its main source of energy. During this period, colonization of foreign lands by European countries in search of natural resources furthered their dominance of industrial processes and their impact on earth’s systems. This legacy continues today as many of us in industrialized countries continue to rely on fossil fuels to maintain our consumption patterns and comfortable way of life.

¹ www.nationtalk.ca

² Global Humanitarian Forum (Geneva). *The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis*, pp.11-14.
www.ghfgeneva.org/Portals/0/pdfs/human_impact_report.pdf

³ For a fuller theological treatment, see Dorothy McDougall, “Sustainability: Embodying an Ecological Worldview,” (KAIROS Backgrounder).

Both in terms of the rapidity of change and its global impact on human and non-human populations, human-induced climate change is the defining issue of our time. This moment of crisis can push us either toward human transformation or human extinction. We do have choices, but they require of us a new imagination about social-economic-ecological relationships. And we must act urgently for the sake of the whole earth community, especially the vulnerable groups in both the northern and southern hemispheres who are the first to suffer the consequences of climate change.

The starting point must be a transformative understanding of what it is to be human on a finite planet.

What does it mean to live within earth's limits?

Can we continue to “grow” our economies while still facing up to ecological limits?

Are the concepts of “economic growth” and “sustainability” simply irreconcilable?

In hard economic times, it is difficult to question the benefits of continuous economic growth as the key to all our aspirations, be they reducing unemployment, increasing our retirement savings or advancing universal health care. Nevertheless, KAIROS invites Canadians to grapple with naming the kind of future we want for ourselves and for “the seventh generation”. Throughout this paper, we will present differing visions of the future, some of which may challenge assumptions about sustainability, economic growth and quality of life.

What would a sustainable future look like? That is the key question.

What is sustainability?

In the 1980s, the UN General Assembly established the World Commission on Environment and Development. Chaired by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, it examined the whole notion of sustainability. Its report, *Our Common Future*, popularized the concept of “sustainable development,” and that concept framed much of the subsequent debate. “Sustainable development,” it stated, “is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴

The Report qualified sustainable development in two further ways: first, it must meet the needs of the world's poor; and it must recognize the limitations of technology and social behaviour. It saw both of these dimensions as integral to the goal of effectively meeting the world's present and future needs.⁵

Sustainability requires consuming natural resources and disposing of society's wastes at a rate that can be safely managed by earth's systems. The greenhouse gases (GHGs) that normally occur in the atmosphere (such as carbon dioxide, methane,

⁴ Harlem Brundtland, Gro. *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. 1987, p. 24.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 25.

nitrous oxide and ozone) can be kept in a balanced equilibrium through earth processes such as photosynthesis. However that balance is upset when greenhouse gases from industrial activity – deforestation, burning massive amounts of fossil fuels (including for transportation) and large agricultural farms – are emitted at a rate that the earth can no longer manage. Such disregard for earth’s limits has led us to a dangerous precipice.

After the almost 25 years since the important insights of *Our Common Future*, it is time to look anew at the critical issue of “sustainability” in the light of today’s realities. We need to probe underlying assumptions in order to address climate change and achieve sustainability goals in a meaningful way.⁶

How do we relate to the natural world when economic growth is built on the exploitation of natural resources that are perceived to be limitless?

Do we assume that nature is directed solely toward the promotion of the human economy?

Can continuous improvements in human technology and a shift to less resource-intensive industries support endless economic growth?

KAIROS believes that there are at least two ways of interpreting “sustainability,” leading to different development outcomes. In exploring these differences, we invite you to share with us your own thinking on this critical issue.

Two paradigms of “sustainability”

Notions of sustainability are shaped by two competing worldviews. The prevailing model (reflected in the Brundtland Report) of “endless economic growth” is supported by those who value the economic and social *status quo* and believe that infinite growth and sustainability are compatible. The second approach – call it “voices-from-the-margins” – invites a fundamental change in assumptions about relationships among humans and between humans and the earth itself.

Representing the first option is Lawrence Summers, former chief economist of the World Bank and now chief advisor on economic issues to U.S. President Barack Obama: “There are no ... limits to the carrying capacity of the Earth that are likely to bind us at any time in the foreseeable future. ...The idea that we should put limits on growth because of some natural limit is a profound error.”⁷

Conscious of the challenges posed by climate change, many conventional economists try to integrate sustainability into their dominant paradigm by promoting the “greening of the economy.” They see the use of more “eco-friendly” product designs and methods of production as mitigating climate change, but also accelerating economic growth through “green” consumption.

⁶ For a more detailed look at the relationship between economics and sustainability, see John Dillon “The Economics of Sustainability,” (KAIROS backgrounder).

⁷ Rees, William and Wackernagel, Mathias. “Ecological Footprints and Appropriated Carrying Capacity: Measuring the Natural Capital Requirements of the Human Economy” in *Investing in Natural Capital: The Ecological Economics Approach to Sustainability*. Eds. Jansson, A.M., et al. Washington: Island Press, 1994, p. 363.

The challenge, according to proponents of green capitalism, is to translate ecological limits into price signals in the marketplace through such mechanisms as carbon trading. This is one reason why business interests are so engaged in the UN climate change negotiations. Some would say that it is this economic agenda rather than climate change amelioration that have constrained the negotiations thus far.

The UN climate talks in Copenhagen in December 2009 represented a moment of choice between moving towards a more sustainable way of life on the planet or a new phase of capital accumulation. Viewed this way, climate change is less an ecological crisis than it is a crisis of values between “a Copenhagen from above and a Copenhagen from below.”⁸

Activists Andre Pusey and Bertie Russell, doctoral candidates from the University of Leeds, claim: “The battle of Copenhagen from above and below is a battle over justice, a battle of values. Capitalism wants to maintain and extend its system of value over all existence – whereas the ‘below’ wants to change what it means to value existence in all its forms.”⁹

Modern capitalism sees the prime motivation for human ingenuity as profit – the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. Economic activity is measured solely in financial terms. Other human characteristics, such as family ties, friendship and unpaid labour in the home are treated as having little or no value. The natural world, too, is assigned a value only when it contributes to the production of financial wealth. Taken in its own right or in its capacity to enhance the community in other ways, it “is invisible and valueless, it can be destroyed at will.”¹⁰ Contrast this belief with the biblical vision that the whole of creation is “indeed very good” (Gen. 1: 31).

The battle will be fought and won over who determines the trajectory of “sustainability.” Currently the world economy is based on easy access to cheap, non-renewable fossil fuels for its energy supply, a system that favours the wealthy and influential, largely from the global North. However, beyond the rhetoric around “greening of the economy,” there are new voices from the global South and North. They are introducing a dialogue that builds on the ideals of justice, equity and earthly affinity – an economics from below.

An economics from below

Economist Herman Daly writes of a new economics which is a “subtle and complex economics of maintenance, qualitative improvements, sharing frugality, and adaptation to natural limits. It is an economics of better, not bigger.”¹¹

⁸ Pusey, Andre and Russell, Bertie. “The Climate Crisis or a Crisis of Politics?” p. 12. Accessed March 10, 2010 at www.anarchiststudies.org/node/423.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Waring, Marilyn. *Counting for Nothing*. Wellington: Allen and Unwin. 1998. p. 204.

¹¹ Daly, Herman. *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainability*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. Quoted in *Growth isn't possible: Why we need a new economic direction*. London: New Economic Foundation (NEF), 2010, p. 121. See www.neweconomics.org/publications/growth-isnt-possible.

University of Surrey professor Tim Jackson is Economics Commissioner on the Sustainable Development Commission in the United Kingdom. He argues the need to de-couple the notion of prosperity from economic growth and solutions to climate change from technological fixes.¹² The idea that technology will save us without substantive change to the dominant economic paradigm, he believes, is not only shortsighted, it is folly.

For Jackson, it is not a matter of individuals choosing to stop consuming. He sees the “structural reliance of the system itself on continued growth” dictating levels of consumption. “The imperative to sell more goods, to innovate continually, to stimulate higher and higher levels of consumer demand is driven forward by the pursuit of growth. But this imperative is now so strong that it seems to undermine the interests of those it’s supposed to serve.”¹³

Consumerism is what drives an economics of perpetual growth, so much so that consumer spending is promoted as the prescription for economic recovery. As Glen Hodgson, senior vice-president and chief economist at the Conference Board of Canada, sees it:

Confidence among consumers and investors is an important element in keeping the wheels of commerce moving, or in slowing them down. If we are confident in the economy as a whole, in our job prospects and in our ability to keep earning, we are likely to buy more, to invest more and to take long-term decisions in favour of more buying and more investment. This positive attitude creates upward momentum in the economy. If, however, consumers and investors ... adopt a more negative attitude ... then we are less likely to buy and invest ... and end up making the overall economy even worse The psychology of recession becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – if we feel bad, things do indeed get worse.¹⁴

In this symbiotic relationship between the conventional economic system and consumerism, coupled with the power of the advertising media, personal choices to alter behaviour are restricted. Putting the blame on individual consumers without addressing the structures that drive consumerism is flawed.

Can meaningful sustainability, including individual lifestyle changes, be achieved by a new economic model that puts a whole-earth ethic at its center?

A whole-earth ethic reshapes the economy to reflect human enterprise, ingenuity and need within the earth community and recognizes that the flourishing of all life is the goal of both healthy ecosystems and healthy human communities. It also recognizes the

¹² Jackson, Tim. *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*. London: Earthscan 2009, p. 76-78.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 97.

¹⁴ Hodgson, Glen. *The Psychology of Recession*. (October 2008) posted on Conference Board of Canada at www.conferenceboard.ca/Economics/hot_eco_topics/default/08-10-31/The_Psychology_of_Recession.aspx. Accessed March 29, 2010.

need for wealth distribution and puts the needs of the poor and the security of peoples' livelihoods at the center of social economic policy.¹⁵

For Christians, a whole-earth ethic invites us to situate our sacred story within the sacred story of the cosmos. Thomas Berry, CP, writes: "On the planet earth, all living things are clearly derived from a single origin. We are literally born as a community; the trees, the birds, and all living creatures are bonded together in a single community of life ... Community is not something that we dream up or think would be nice. Literally, we are a single community."¹⁶

Where is God in this sacred story? How do we account for Christian experience that reveals a God that is for us – a God that is involved with human history? Theologian Sallie McFague writes: "I will suggest that the traditional creation-providence story ... has underscored God's power over divine love, God's transcendence over divine immanence; God's distance from the world over God's involvement in it. ... An incarnational context for understanding the God-world relationship has implications for our response to climate change. It means that we and God are in the same place and that we share responsibility for the world."¹⁷

In order to take our responsibility for earth's flourishing seriously, do we need to re-examine our notions of well-being?

Tim Jackson's *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* turns the notion of prosperity on its head. Rejecting traditional measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), he insists: "At the end of the day prosperity goes beyond material pleasures. It transcends material concerns. It resides in the quality of our lives and in the health and happiness of our families. It is present in the strength of our relationships and our trust in the community. It is evidenced by our satisfaction at work and our sense of shared meaning and purpose. It hangs on our potential to participate fully in the life of society The challenge for our society is to create the conditions under which this is possible. It is the most urgent task of our times."¹⁸

Jackson calls for an ecologically literate economics that is based in "low-carbon activities that employ people in ways that contribute meaningfully to human flourishing," the seeds of which already exist "in local or community-based social enterprises."¹⁹ His work echoes the cries of many of KAIROS' partners in the global South and the movements that support their efforts. These are the voices from the margins that speak out of their own experience. Climate Justice Now! (CJN!) is an international network of social movements that includes KAIROS' global partners, Indigenous peoples, peasant farmers and fishers committed to finding genuine solutions to the climate crisis.

¹⁵ *Prosperity*. p. 141.

¹⁶ Dunn, Stephen and Lonergan, Anne, eds. *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth: Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke*. Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications. 1991, p. 15.

¹⁷ McFague, Sallie. *A New Climate for Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress. 2008, p. 63.

¹⁸ *Prosperity*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid*. p. 130.

In July 2009 the CJN! Network issued a statement saying, in part:

We cannot trust the market with our future, nor put our faith in unsafe, unproven and unsustainable technologies. Contrary to those who put their faith in “green capitalism,” we know that it is impossible to have infinite growth on a finite planet.

Instead of trying to fix a destructive system, we should be leaving fossil fuels in the ground, reasserting peoples’ and community control over resources and production, re-localizing food production, massively reducing over consumption, particularly in the North, recognizing the ecological and climate debt owed to the peoples of the South and making reparations respecting Indigenous and forest peoples’ rights.

Real solutions to the climate crisis are being built by women and men, in both the South and the North, who fight every day to defend their environment and living conditions. We need to globalize these solutions and work for a just transition towards a zero-carbon future.²⁰

One of the significant features of an ecological economic paradigm is that it is community-based and democratically controlled. It is an economy that is situated within the ecosystem, which sustains its activity and therefore is responsive to the immediate feedback loops that the ecosystem provides and that markets are deaf to.

Such an approach invites a different kind of relationship to the natural world, as well as other cultures, that is not based on consumption but on cooperation and the recognition of limits. Sustainability as a way of life means that limits to economic growth act as a challenge to humanity’s capacity for egocentrism.

We are all connected – God, humans, and other-than-humans. We are all in this together. In this worldview Jesus’ command “to love one another as I have loved you” takes on an even deeper meaning. It expands the answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” It calls us to consider the well being of the whole earth community as we make political and economic decisions about how we are to live in the world.

How might we move in this direction? What are the concrete changes that we need to make both in lifestyle and in government policy? How can we create a momentum for change that will take us into the future?

In the next weeks, as we travel with our partners across Canada these are some of the issues that will frame our conversation in the hopes that all of us together may create the kind of world that will sustain life into the future.

²⁰ See: www.carbontradewatch.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=227&Itemid=95

Questions for Discussion

1) What would a sustainable economy look like for Canada? What would be the downside? The upside?

2) What social or political barriers would need to be overcome in the transition to a sustainable economy?

3) What is your response to the Climate Justice Now Network's position that, *"Instead of trying to fix a destructive system, we should be leaving fossil fuels in the ground, reasserting peoples' and community control over resources and production, re-localizing food production, massively reducing over consumption ..."*