

A COMMENTARY ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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What exactly does sustainable development mean anyway? It seems to be the catch-word of our generation. Yet many people perceive that word with uncertainty and big question marks. Maybe that's because there are so many different perspectives of what sustainable development actually looks like.

When referring to sustainable development most people go back to the Brundtland Report, or "Our Common Future" report, which defines sustainable development as "*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" Although this 1986 definition is important in that it brought the notion of sustainable development to the mainstream society, it is certainly not the birth of the concept as many have come to believe.

The concept of planning for the Seventh Generation, or the faces yet to come, was an integral part of indigenous decision-making long before the Brundtland Report. Through the intimate knowledge of our traditional territories upon which we survived, indigenous peoples have been living this concept since time immemorial. Having been given the instructions by the Creator to act as caretakers of Mother Earth and all of her children, the indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (North America) live in a kinship relationship with the environment of which we

form an integral part. Consider these words of the Peacemaker of the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse and of the Iroquois Confederacy) from many many centuries ago:

Think not of yourselves, O Chiefs, nor of your own generation. Think of continuing generations of our families, think of our grandchildren and of those yet unborn, whose faces are coming from beneath the ground.

The Peacemaker of
the Haudenosaunee

Many centuries after these words were spoken, the forces of colonization have devastated the environment, as well as the social, cultural, and economic structures of indigenous peoples throughout the world. These peoples are now struggling to regain the tools and resources needed to heed the words of the Peacemaker.

Today, with capitalism as the driving force, we are seeing unprecedented rates of poverty, social upheaval, and environmental destruction among all nations of the world. The domestic policies and government-supported trade agreements, and the highly influential multi-national corporations, are wreaking havoc on the environment and social/cultural structures of communities throughout the world. Through their actions, it is clear that many governments and companies have equated the notion of "sustain-

able development” with “economic development,” throwing the term around and peppering their documents with it in order to appease the public. Although economic development is an important component of a sustainable community, it must not outweigh the environmental, social/cultural, and spiritual considerations. Yet these considerations are more often than not given negligible weighting in current government decision-making. In the name of “sustainable development” our resources are being exploited at unprecedented rates, our food supply is being taken over by genetically modified organisms, our lands and waters are being saturated with pesticides, and our climate is being altered and our air polluted by the industries that support the supposed “needs” of society — all with very scary and uncertain impacts on the environment, economy, and social/cultural structures of communities.

Because of such instances, many people are sceptical of the term “sustainable development.” How can it be a good thing if it has produced such unsustainable policies and activities throughout the world? I think we need to talk more about “sustainable lifestyles” and “sustainable livelihoods” instead of only “sustainable development.”

On an individual level, we need to take a serious look at how our actions affect people and ecosystems around us and in other parts of the world. This doesn’t mean that we have to give up our lifestyle and ALL the modern conveniences that we’ve become used to, but it does mean factoring the environmental & social impacts of our actions and purchases into our decision-making. It means asking more questions and finding better alternatives.

On a government level, we need to re-think our production and consumption choices. Why do we focus so much on wasteful, resource-heavy, and polluting production? Why doesn’t the price of consuming these goods accurately reflect the price their production imposes on people and the environment? Because if it did, the price of most goods would be so high that we would no longer be able to afford them!

In order to meet the basic needs of all people and to protect the environment, decision-makers need to start thinking on a smaller scale. Policies need to support the livelihoods of people at the community level. Of course those who have a vested interest in the current capitalist system will say that shifting policies to support decentralized, small-scale production, and local consumption is unrealistic, impractical, or too costly. But what they really mean is that it will be impractical or costly to those who already have the means to support their families quite comfortably, all at the expense of indigenous peoples and others at the community level, who suffer to support this comfortable minority.

Today the words of the Peacemaker still ring true in the decision-making processes in our communities, but to truly achieve sustainable development, lifestyles and livelihoods, indigenous peoples need to have access to our traditional territories, resources, and activities. We need to be able to make our own decisions that accurately reflect the needs of our families and communities. As the old saying goes, “the one who wears the shoe best knows if it fits.” We know that the current “sustainable development” policies we are subjected to and affected by throughout the world do not “fit” in our communities.