

Sustainable development

Can it be made to work in the real world?

ability interdependence stewardship consumption attitudes belonging behaviour responsibility justice trade leadership diversity value equity accountability

A response to the 2000

Reith lectures

from the John Ray Initiative

The BBC Reith Lectures in 2000 were entitled ***Respect for the Earth - Can Sustainable Development be made to work in the real world*** and were broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service. The six lectures were given in different countries and the lecturers answered questions from local audiences and from Internet contributions. The lectures have been published as ***Respect for the Earth*** and is published by ***Profile Books***.

This document is a Christian appreciation of and response to ***Respect for the Earth***, from The John Ray Initiative, an educational charity that brings together scientific and Christian understanding in a way that can be widely communicated and lead to effective action.

Sustainable development – living today as if tomorrow matters

Ensuring that the world and its people have a future

Because of human activities, the world is facing unparalleled environmental crises, including the loss of biodiversity, climate change, population pressures and a growing imbalance between rich and poor.

The way we respond to this depends on our underlying attitudes. Crucial to any debate about sustainable development is the need to establish that we depend on one another.

More than ever we are aware that we **belong** to a global family. The notion that we are islands entire of ourselves is no longer true – even if it ever was.

Jet travel and modern communication allow us to see just how powerfully one person's actions can influence other people near and far. An increased awareness of climate change shows how the effects of our behaviour can extend to **future** generations.

Rising globalism emphasises the need for honourable leadership that

recognises its **accountability** to people who live today, those who will live in the future and ultimately to God.

Every person is charged to make decisions. Some people's decisions will have local impact on their family and community, others will have wider-reaching consequences. We will only live in a more fulfilling and just world when there is **equity and fairness** in people's ability to make decisions on the issues affecting their lives.

The world is incredible partly because of the huge variety of plants, animals and habitats that it contains. This **diversity** needs to be cherished.

Familiarity breeds contempt, and we are in danger of losing our sense of **gratitude** for the wonderful world we live in.

Our ability to manipulate and utilise species and environments needs to be wielded in an attitude of **humility**, recognising that our ignorance often far outweighs our knowledge.

As our understanding of the interconnected relationship of all living things increases, so our **responsibility** also increases.

In a world where there is a net transfer of resources from the poor to the rich nations, we need to take seriously calls for **justice**.

We have a moral duty to look after our planet and to hand it on in good order to future generations. That is what experts mean when they talk of “sustainable development”: not sacrificing tomorrow’s prospects for a largely, illusory gain today.

This Common Inheritance - 1990 UK Government White Paper

Sustainable development – the background

While most people agree with the notion of sustainable development, the topic causes problems in practice because there is no agreed route to securing a viable heritage for our children and grandchildren. What one group sees as an appropriate use of resources, another sees as wanton destruction. What one sector sees as scientific progress, another sees as tampering with nature – often spelt with a capital ‘N’.

It is thirty years since the World Council of Churches placed sustainable development on the Christian agenda, with its 1970 call for a sustainable and just society. The idea was developed further in the background study for the United Nations Conference on the environment held in Stockholm in 1972, which said humankind’s fundamental task was to “devise patterns of collective behaviour compatible with the continued flowering of civilisations.”

Two key initiatives guided thinking in the 1980s and 1990s. First, in 1983 the United Nations established the World Commission on Environment and Development. It was led by Gro Harlem Brundtland and in 1987 published *Our Common Future*.

Secondly, the June 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro, the co-called Earth Summit, had four main achievements:

- Agenda 21 - a comprehensive blueprint for the global and local actions needed to move towards sustainable development,
- The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development - a set of principles defining the rights and responsibilities of states in this area,
- A set of principles to support the sustainable management of forests worldwide, and
- Two legally binding conventions aiming to prevent global climate

change and to protect biodiversity. These were signed by representatives of more than 150 countries.

Sustainable development demands that we place proper value on the “natural capital” represented by the world’s natural resources. Recognising their value creates the incentive to use them with as much ingenuity and care as possible.

Any debate of sustainable development must recognise that we can never hand on the planet unchanged. Our challenge is to hand it over improved, or at the very least undamaged.

The six Reith lecturers gave their diagnoses of the current situation and recommendations for treatment. They challenged us to concentrate on action rather than talk and to leave a legacy that we will be proud to hand on. This response provides a Christian perspective to that challenge.

The Reith Lectures 2000

What they said

“Accountable government gains legitimate public authority” *Chris Patten*

Chris Patten is a European Commissioner and was the last Governor of Hong Kong. He was also a UK Minister for Overseas Development and as Secretary of State for the Environment he oversaw the UK’s first White Paper on sustainable development - *This Common Inheritance, 1990*. He spoke about Governance. He raised issues about the source of **authority**, the role of law and the need for **accountability**. For him, the shifts in politics and organisations are adventures in dialogue that attempt to persuade and secure consent.

“What we call natural disasters are not always natural. They often happen where a little recognised ecosystem... has broken down”
Tom Lovejoy

Tom Lovejoy, Chief Biodiversity Advisor for the World Bank, spoke about Biodiversity. He raised issues about our treatment of **creation** and **our status** within it. He believes that biodiversity is the best single indicator of an area’s long-term biological and economic health.

John Browne, Chief Executive of BP Amoco spoke about Business. He raised issues of **stewardship** and **responsible management**, and showed how governments,

“indications of a human effect on the climate are mounting. Precautionary action is justified”
Sir John Browne

industry, economy and individuals interact and interconnect in a dynamic fashion. He believes that business plays a fundamental role in delivering sustainable development through the principle of enlightened self-interest, and argued that technology is the key to tackling the growing threat of climate change without undermining economic growth.

“Families living in freedom and given the opportunity to fulfil their basic needs, have fewer children. These children are more likely to be healthy and educated.”
Gro Harlem Brundtland

Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director General of the World Health Organisation, spoke about Health and Population. She raised issues about accepting and carrying out **sustainable behaviour**. She

believes that issues of women, poverty, education and population are intrinsically linked, and that health should be seen as part of our investment in developing countries, not a dividend to be reaped later.

“It is women and small farmers working with biodiversity who are the primary food providers in the Third World”
Vandana Shiva

Vandana Shiva, Director of the Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, New Delhi, spoke on Poverty and Globalisation, and about the recognition and legitimisation of **authority** in society. She wants world systems to move away from ones based on fear and scarcity, monocultures and monopolies and appropriation and dispossession.

“We should use science to understand how nature works, not to change what nature is.”
Prince Charles

HRH the Prince of Wales spoke about **interdependence** and the acceptance of **divine limits**. He specifically raised **spiritual issues**. He believes in the need to rediscover a sense of the sacred in our dealings with the natural world.

Recurring themes

“The choice facing humanity is not whether, [but] how much we affect the environment,” said Tom Lovejoy. All the speakers recognised that just as human beings play a large part in creating many social, environmental and political problems, so can they also be part of the **solutions**.

Pointing forward, Chris Patten identified that sustainable development needs the co-ordinated efforts of a “mosaic of institutions, policies and values”, a “political ecosystem”. He painted doom-laden portraits of life in countries with poor structures for accountability of their leaders. Set against this, Western-type standards of democracy were seen as goals that other countries should aim for, as a basis for their future.

“Accountable government gains legitimate public authority, a vital quality when unpopular decisions have to be taken or good policies have to be enforced... Concepts of **good governance** or democracy were arguably implicit in the earliest definitions of sustainable development,” he commented.

Speaking for the small producer, Vandana Shiva expressed her anxiety that globalisation was destroying this accountability. She claimed that globalisation was anathema to sustainability and the cause of local poverty, grief and suicide. “For me it is now time radically to re-evaluate what we are doing. For what we are doing in the name of

globalisation to the poor is brutal and unforgivable,” she claimed.

Giving people real decision-making power was also central to Gro Harlem Brundtland’s presentation. She quoted UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who stresses the need “to give every man, woman and child an opportunity to make the most of their abilities in safety and dignity”.

Sustainability, she said, starts by **empowering** people to make meaningful choices and supporting families, with particular regard to children and women. For her, health security was as important as national security.

One outworking of this is that it automatically removes a key obstacle to sustainability – namely population explosion. “Years of observation and experience have shown that families living in freedom and given the opportunity to fulfil their basic needs, have fewer children. These children are more likely to be healthy and educated. Societies that have satisfied the basic needs of their populations tend to reduce pollution and environmental destruction,” said Brundtland.

Sustainable societies also need organisations with **long term goals**. John Browne felt that “enlightened self-interest” of business was a key for our future. He drew from history the lesson that survival and true

sustainability are inseparable from **change**. Browne gave examples of positive changes in his own experience with the oil industry.

“Sustainability,” he commented, “is not about freezing a system at a particular moment in time. It is about recognising where the system is close to reaching the limits of its capacity and acting to forestall those risks. And that requires constructive engagement from us all.”

Prince Charles saw **enlightened self-interest** as a theme running through the lectures, but emphasised the need to dig deeper than that. He called in addition for a “sense of urgency and moral purpose required to confront hard choices which face us on the long road to sustainable development.”

The Prince called for the inclusion of a **spiritual dimension** in the debate, saying that “the idea that there is a sacred trust between mankind and our Creator, under which we accept a duty of stewardship for the earth, has been an important feature of most religious and spiritual thought throughout the ages.”

His fear was that this belief had become “smothered by almost impenetrable layers of scientific rationalism,” and he worried that we are relegating life to a purely mechanical process devoid of meaning.

A Christian response

In a world created and ruled by God, spiritual problems are the root of environmental crises. We can only achieve true sustainability in humility and partnership with our Creator.

Dominate or care

Some people say that the biblical command to “have dominion” over creation (Genesis 1:28) legitimises unrestricted plundering of living and non-living global resources.

This, however, is a naïve misunderstanding. The Bible says that human beings are creatures “made in the image of God”. Also the earth does not belong to us – we are responsible stewards charged with looking after God’s property.

God has given humankind “kingly rule” over creation. To the original Hebrew readers this implied exercising loving care like a shepherd with his flock – care that saw the health of the sheep as paramount.

Theologian Walter Bruggemann points out that in Genesis (2:15-17) God creates humankind and gives three conditions for our behaviour – vocation, permission and prohibition. Our vocation is to care for ourselves and our planet. Our permission is almost endless – the whole world is available as we carry out our vocation of care. But

there is a prohibition, a condition.

God is the source of authority.

This framework provides for a sustainability that uses the world’s resources while loving one another, honouring God our Creator and respecting his creation.

Equity and waste

The lectures frequently alluded to the growing rich-poor divide.

Current world economic activity and world trade moves wealth from poor to rich. Sustainability demands much greater equity.

Since 1950, the world’s richest 20% have doubled their *per capita* consumption. In contrast average African households now consume 20% less than in 1975. Chris Patten said, “The challenge for democracies is to convince people today in the developed countries that success isn’t just extending appetites.”

In addition, growing over-consumption of resources leads to ever more waste.

These symptoms of unsustainability are strongly condemned in the Bible, by both Jesus and Old Testament prophets who denounced those who were “grinding the faces of the poor” (Isaiah 3:15) and “selling the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6).

Sustainability implies Sustainable Consumption. “Societies need to examine their values and consider how goals can be met with

the least damaging consumption”.*

*From *Towards Sustainable Consumption* – joint report by The Royal Society, London and the US National Academy of Sciences, June 1997

A fundamental flaw

A further problem is that “we know what to do but lack the will to do it”.* This impotence arises from the underlying disease of human selfishness, arrogance and greed. A fundamental error is to believe that we can solve our problems with political or organisational solutions while ignoring God, his commands and his love.

*Crispin Tickell: in the *Doomsday Letters*, Radio 4

A redeemed world

Christians believe that human rebellion against God is the root cause of the disease and the symptoms that are leading to unsustainable exploitation.

But God has provided a solution. The death of God’s son Jesus Christ some 2000 years ago paid the penalty for our rebellion. His death can restore broken relationships, and reconcile all things (Colossians 1:20). But Jesus Christ’s life did not end at death. His resurrection demonstrates that God will renew the whole of creation.

Our part is to acknowledge our mistakes, ask for God’s forgiveness and then live and work in the knowledge that he is restoring our relationship with him, with each other, and with the rest of creation.

Two books

A pluralistic culture will always have difficulty establishing and defining its rules. After all, why should I live by your set of standards? We need however to establish sets of principles in order to progress towards sustainability.

Seventeenth century scientists spoke of two books where these principles can be found. The first is the book of God's works in creation. Look around and we can learn some valuable lessons. Recycling, for example, is an important natural principle that we would do well to follow.

The second book is God's word – The Bible. This richly reveals the true nature of God, ourselves and the world. It includes well-known injunctions to love God and our neighbour as much as we love ourselves. In addition, Jesus' radical Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chapters 5 & 6) turns the tables on the rich and powerful in favour of the weak and poor.

The role of self

Self-interest is a dangerous theme. People are on much safer ground when they are actively considering the needs of others.

The enlightened self-interest mentioned by several lecturers has a value if 'self' is expanded to include the stakeholders in a company, the community, or even the whole world. The self that fits comfortably

in the Bible model is a person who takes on the role of a devoted servant (Mark 10:43-45).

The quest for sustainability demands that we reassess our role within the world. The outcome of this reassessment, however, is critical. We could denigrate ourselves, by seeing humankind as no greater than any other animal. Alternatively we could accept whole-heartedly our vocation and take charge – not for selfish gain, but for the good of our global community, for the world as a whole and ultimately in a manner that gives praise to our God.

Adapt and react

The biological and geophysical world is in constant change. It is not a stagnant pond. The world's sustainability is a product of its ability to adapt and mutate. A myriad of life forms have altered and adapted as their environment has changed. Social structures also evolve as we discharge our responsibilities to each other in changing circumstances.

A biblical understanding of

good stewardship includes the idea of reacting to situations in a world that is constantly changing. God is at work too and we need to be in partnership with him.

An Old Testament character, Joseph, became the 'prime minister' of Egypt. He listened to God and was put in the right place to lay down food stores over the seven years that preceded a famine, so averting a major crisis for the country (Genesis 41).

Jesus' Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-25) indicates that we are required to make responsible use of our resources, not simply to treat them as museum pieces. The parable also implies the need to take a long-term view.

Human beings were created in God's image (Genesis 1:26). To fulfil this potential we need to align ourselves with God's mind and be creative through our humble use of all the moral and intellectual resources we have been given.

This makes the pursuit of sustainability in partnership with God such a challenging, but enormously rewarding, activity.

From a Hebrew poem (Psalm 19)

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge...
The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple...
The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes...
By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward...
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

Check list for sustainability

Have we faced the facts?

- Have the future implications been properly considered and any negative consequences adequately justified?
- Has the planning included risk assessments that recognise the limitations of current knowledge and data?
- Will this action increase or decrease the prospect for diversity, for example biodiversity?
- Has account been taken of the interconnectedness of all systems involved?
- Has the full environmental cost been considered?
- Will the “capital” of natural resources be enhanced or depleted?

Are we doing this the best way?

- Is there transparency in the way that this decision was made and implemented?
- Are there robust mechanisms for accountability?
- Is this action a result of honourable and bold leadership, or simply abdicating responsibility and bowing to pressure?
- Can you face your children and grandchildren and honestly say “we did our best”?

Does this reflect our Christian responsibility?

- Does this action reflect a spirit of gratitude for what we have, or one of hoarding and a desire to dominate?
- Will this action help people who are poor?
- Does this decision respect the equity of all people affected by it?
- Will there be benefit to the whole of creation?

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