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Pragmatic Sustainability

Theoretical and practical tools

Edited by Steven A. Moore

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Editor's Introduction to Chapter 2

As did philosopher Paul B. Thompson in Chapter 1, economist Michael D. Oden struggles with the definition of terms. What is and is not to be included as a dimension of sustainable development? Oden argues that the idea of some form of equity has been routinely affixed to the concept. The canonical model identifies ongoing efforts to balance economic growth, environmental conservation, and equity (the 3Es) as the main project of sustainable development. Nonetheless, a coherent definition of equity has not been seriously considered, nor has the concept been integrated into most sustainable development scholarship and practice. The more refined concept of complex equity offers a compelling way to fashion a more complete normative framework that brings dimensions of social power and exclusion into the heart of sustainable development discourse and practice. If inequalities in one social dimension contribute to inequalities in other social dimensions, exclusion and marginalization can undermine the ability to build the civic culture, mobilize the broader political coalitions and broaden and deepen discourses necessary to advance meaningful sustainable development initiatives. Attention to the concept of complex equity must, it is therefore argued, be at the center rather than the periphery of sustainable development discourse and practice.

In observing that "Business is the order of the day," John Dewey raised his concern that the emerging market economy of 1924 might subvert the very core of our democratic institutions and challenge our ability to regenerate a just society. Better than eighty years later, Oden has articulated terms that will be helpful in challenging the rationale behind that order.

Chapter 2

Equity

The Forgotten E in Sustainable Development

Michael D. Oden

It has been two decades since the Brundtland Commission Report elevated the concept of sustainable development to a prominent position in public policy discourse. As academic and policy discussions flourished around this seminal topic, definitions of sustainability centered on resource conservation as a requirement for ecosystem regeneration through time – a resource concept of continuing without lessening. From the beginning some idea of equity (economic, social, and political), as part of what has been called the "triple bottom line," has been affixed to the ecological foundation of the sustainable development framework.

This chapter argues that a meaningful concept of equity has not, in fact, been seriously integrated into most sustainable development scholarship and practice. Constantly bandied about, but rarely defined or made operational, equity is at best a subsidiary concern in the sustainable development discourse and at worst a politically correct totem to be bowed to when advancing the main agenda. Different ideas of simple economic equity have, by and large, been embroidered onto the broader economic growth/environmental sustainability tapestry.

The central premise here is that significant progress toward social and environmental development processes that dramatically reduce the consumption of natural resources and damage to the natural world depends upon a strong normative position on equity and social justice. The claim that equity should be at the center of sustainable development theory and practice embodies ethical propositions, but the main support advanced in this chapter rests on two pragmatic arguments. First, unless sustainable development proponents incorporate equity into their core agenda, natural capital consumption and environmental degradation will always be "cheap" in certain domains, undermining efforts to radically improve environmental outcomes. The struggle against environmental racism is only one dimension of complex inequality. Unless resources and power are more widely distributed, a firm floor limiting unsustainable environmental practices will not exist on certain lands, in certain settlements or in certain workplaces. Second, unless a clear concept of equity moves to the center of sustainable development practice the political discourse and coalitions necessary to achieve substantial progress cannot be built. This is both a political question and a question of theory. Unless environmental advocates join in new and durable collaborations with groups organized to advance social and political equity concerns, there will be a persistent power deficit vis-à-vis large entrenched interests engaged in unsustainable status quo practices.

Such alternative coalitions will simply not emerge unless a well-defined and well-articulated concept of equity is at the heart of the sustainability discourse. But also unless the voice, influence and knowledge of people and groups currently excluded from effective participation are more fully incorporated into the sustainability discourse, we will not have the information and social basis to deal with the complex adaptive processes highlighted by McDaniel and Lanham or to renew democratic social institutions to maintain what Thompson identifies as functional integrity of whole systems (McDaniel and Lanham, Chapter 3, this volume; Thompson, Chapter 1, this volume).

In the first section of the chapter, I delineate why concepts of economic and political equity have remained on the periphery of much sustainable development scholarship and practice. In the second part, several theoretical constructs of equity are analyzed from traditions of neoclassical economics and moral philosophy. I argue that Michael Walzer's concept of complex equity offers a compelling way to construct a more complete normative framework that brings various dimensions of social power or exclusion to the fore. I then build an empirical case that growing economic inequality in the US is shaping distributions in other social spheres including educational opportunities, political access and power, and protection from environmental hazards. This, in turn, undermines the ability to change the civic culture, draw upon a broader base of information and mobilize political coalitions necessary to advance meaningful sustainable development initiatives.

Based on the case of US urban regions, the chapter concludes by examining the strong complementarities between specific equity concerns (e.g., living wage, affordable housing, and transportation access campaigns) and key urban environmental problems (point and non-point source pollution and excessive energy consumption). The construction of coalitions with the requisite political power to challenge typical urban growth regimes can only be formed when environmental and social justice interests are joined in a more complete normative framework of sustainability.

Avoiding equity

There are very good reasons why full and serious consideration of equity has not generally been embedded in sustainability scholarship and practice. From the environmental side, it is not obvious how more equal distributions of wealth or power relate the central problem of ecosystem regeneration. There are those who argue the essential focus on ecological and biodiversity issues will wane in favor of human needs and desires when social concerns and goals are drawn into the middle of the environmental conservation project (Newton and Freyfogle 2005). Critiques of "anthropocentric" views are common in the sustainability discourse, but not typically directed to equity issues per se. Yet many do not accept the Brundtland Commission's claim that sustainable development is contingent upon or intrinsically consistent with economic growth (Rees 2003). Reducing resource consumption may be so crucial for environmental sustainability that increasing opportunities for poor people or poor countries to climb the ladder of economic wealth must fall to a secondary priority. Blame must also be directed to equity advocates who have failed to demonstrate how more equitable distributions of income or wealth translate into superior economic growth/environmental conservation tradeoffs.

Perhaps a more fundamental reason why equity is an underdeveloped component of the sustainability discourse is the deep conceptual and ideological divides that make serious discussions of equity highly charged and politically problematic. At least in the US context, one could assert that discussions of equity or existing inequality entail more trying ideological resistance than calls for environmental improvement. The popularity of sustainable development as a policy and planning goal is in some measure related to the presumption that it is "in everyone's interests." There are many who believe that sustainable development precepts, rationally discussed, will tend to naturally generate social consensus and action (Gunder 2006). However, easy consensus often unravels when equity issues are seriously engaged.

Discussions of economic and social equity typically run up against deeply held beliefs about the intrinsic fairness of market resource allocations. In Economics 101 we learn a theory of income distribution based upon diminishing returns – the marginal productivity theory of distribution. In a market economy the story goes, private firms hire labor up to the point where the wage of the last worker equals the value of their marginal product. So if the last worker hired added 10 units an hour to output which sold for $1 per unit, they would be hired if their wages were $10 per hour or less. This model could be said to be branded into the minds of many US citizens; workers in the market fairly receive what they contribute at the margin to production or economic wealth.

It doesn't matter that the marginal productivity theory is at best a heuristic, flawed in its specific application to complex private firms producing complex products and services, it tells a compelling tale. If an individual wants higher wages (more economic wealth), they simply choose to become more productive by investing in human capital (education and training). High-income individuals make wise choices to sacrifice immediate work and income to augment their human capital in ways that the market values highly. Low-income individuals, by deduction, simply choose to work for immediate consumption or limit their work, avoiding the sacrifices necessary to become more productive and affluent.

A tiny percentage of US citizens would likely be able to recount the marginal productivity theory of distribution, but an idea of market fairness in distribution dominates public discourse. Highly unequal market outcomes for individuals are viewed as just, or at least acceptable. High income and wealth result from prudent choices and sacrifice, low income and poverty from poor choices or lack of character and discipline. Market distribution is hence aligned with meritocracy and just desserts. This can extend further in accepting that the wealthy have disproportionate political influence due to the prudence and wisdom that their economic position reflects, while the poor are excluded from power because of their lack of virtue or pathological behaviors (Hayes 1995: 27).

While environmental stewardship can be framed as a potentially wise investment in a kind of "capital stock" in pecuniary cost–benefit terms, serious demands to redress inequality strike at the legitimacy of market outcomes and very sensitive social arrangements and systems of belief (or faith). Convincing members of the local chamber of commerce to shut down a nearby coal-powered plant, substituting various energy-saving demand management initiatives might be a hard sell. But one could allude to overall efficiency gains, improvements in local amenities from better air quality and so on. Imagine instead arguing for the need to significantly increase a local minimum wage or to force developers to build affordable housing as part of their residential projects. It is not surprising that consensus-seeking environmentalists may steer clear of basic equity issues or allude to equity in general terms that require little engagement with specific issues.

Most symptomatic of the marginal position of equity in the sustainability discourse is that the term is typically not even defined with care or precision. In much of the sustainable development cannon it is not at all clear what we should be concerned with equalizing. So if we are even going to consider equity as an essential element of sustainability, what do we mean by the term and why is equity essential to the movement toward more sustainable development?

The status and importance of equity

Consideration of equity and social justice has always been a central theme in political and moral philosophy (Jones 1957). Embedded in the social contact theories of Hobbs, Rousseau and Kant are ideals of equity and fairness. The benefits of submitting to the laws of a state are seen as flowing from security, equal treatment of similar cases (lack of arbitrary rule) and a degree of guaranteed personal freedom (Graham 2007).

Equity is misconstrued in some contemporary ideological accounts as a demand for everyone being exactly equal in all material and social dimensions – some idea of leveling to sameness. No one, including Marx, has ever argued this; evolution and the fabric of human society are based upon differentiation and division of activity. Yet all theories of politics and ethics argue that individuals be treated equally across some social or cultural dimension. Libertarians call for equal and unassailable rights over personal property, neoclassical economists argue that all should be treated equally in market exchanges of goods and labor, liberal political theorists view one person – one vote – as an essential foundation for democracy. However, more comprehensive claims for economic and social equity remain controversial and theoretically problematic.

Many contemporary theories and debates focus around concepts and conditions of economic equity. Hausman and McPherson offer a masterful outline and assessment of contemporary debates about economic equity (Hausman and McPherson 1996: 139–144). Beginning with the common distinction between concepts of equity based upon equality of welfare versus equality of resources, they note that striving for equality of welfare between individuals achieves neither equity nor social justice equity (Hausman and McPherson 1996: 139).[1] Organizing our institutions to ensure that everyone feels equally well off or satisfied in the terms of neoclassical welfare measures is impossible because individuals have different preferences for consumption, work, play, and so on. Hence, systematic comparisons and adjustments of welfare across numerous individuals are not achievable. In addition, striving to equalize individual welfare would imply organizing things to make someone cruel and slothful just as happy as someone who was kind and hardworking.

More plausible constructs of economic equity can be derived from theories that argue that resources (versus welfare) should be the subject of redistribution. The resources or means to welfare improvement are what should be the subject of equity concerns; once individuals have access to equivalent resources the welfare they obtain is the outcome of their own free choices. Economists have devised elaborate models to evaluate conditions under which more equal access to resources would lead to more equitable outcomes. All such constructs could be said to have very serious problems. If, for example, all goods and services were divided into equal bundles and distributed to all "community members," the bundles would not be equally valuable due to different individual tastes (Dworkin 2000).[2]

The deeper challenge for resource-based conceptions is the remaining inequality of internal resources, including personal capacities and talents. When internal resources – mental and physical abilities, stamina, proclivity to work, etc. – are unequal, an equal distribution of external resources will lead over time to highly unequal outcomes. Many would view a redistribution of rewards to natural ability as unfair and inefficient (a disincentive to productivity). But distributions of physical and mental abilities (e.g., deafness or photographic memory) may be just as arbitrary as material resources. A lot of logical gymnastics have been carried out to try to distinguish between internal differences that deserve compensation to achieve equity and those that do not (Hausman and McPherson 1996; Cohen 1989; Okin 1989). Physical handicaps are obvious, but what about a person's willingness to work or hardships suffered from undertaking religious prohibitions?

Since very general conditions of economic equity based on either welfare or resource redistribution are both highly abstract and theoretically problematic, a number of less restrictive and comprehensive frameworks have been proposed. A more limited concept of economic equity is the famous difference principle proposed by John Rawls. His goal is to derive a theory whereby rational agents in a liberal market society would consensually agree on a definition of distributive justice and the rules by which it could be achieved. To derive these principles Rawls imposes a veil of ignorance on all citizens in what he terms "an original position" (Rawls 1972). Behind the veil of ignorance agents are completely ignorant of their social position or past (status, race, gender, family background). In this original position, rational agents would seek to minimize the potential harms of ending up at the low end of economic resource distributions. Specifically in the "original position" rational agents would agree on three basic principles: (1) each person has the same claim to the most extensive basic liberties, compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; (2) social and economic inequalities are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and (3) social and economic inequalities are justified if they provide the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society (Rawls 2001).

The third "difference" principle can be interpreted as a socially compelling choice that "the prospects of each class of individual should be improved so long as the position of the worst off is maximized" (Graham 2007: 61). Everyone can get more so long as those at the bottom get a bit more than everyone else. A number of the above noted difficulties, including how to parse between advantages that are natural versus inherited or involuntary, apply to the Rawlsian framework. However, some idea of a difference principle could offer more practical and convincing justifications for policies limiting hereditary wealth transfer, equalizing educational opportunities and various social safety net measures. Moreover, while it is the third principle that has received the most attention in discussions of economic equity, the first two principles (actually priors in Rawls' broader theory) suggest a broader, more complex idea of equity that encompasses political equity, equal opportunity for participation, equal protection from environmental hazards and so forth.

This brings us to a distinctly different approach that may be more theoretically compelling and practically relevant to the sustainable development project, Michael Walzer's theory of complex equity. Walzer does not believe there is any "right" or intrinsically equitable distribution of resources, but instead argues that each sphere of social life is subject to unique distributive standards (Walzer 1983). For instance, the political realm in liberal democracies should be governed by free political rights (to vote, participate, etc.), while leadership and power are granted to those who can persuade, encourage, and manage public affairs. Inequalities in the economic realm are shaped by self-interest, work, innovativeness, and competitiveness. Because social meanings and standards of operation are different in the distinct spheres of social activity, distributions in each sphere must be autonomous. It is not inequalities within individual spheres that constitute the principle problem of equity, rather it is inequalities in one sphere spilling over and shaping distributions in another sphere with different intrinsic meanings and standards of distribution. In the contemporary US setting, for example, the problem of equity is not economic inequality per se, but the fact that highly unequal wealth distribution strongly influences distributions of educational opportunity, political access and power, exposure to environmental costs and outcomes in other domains. In other countries or cultures the problem may be more that political inequality or inequalities in religious status shape economic or political distributions. The overriding equity concern is preserving the relative autonomy of the major spheres of social life so that inequalities do not corrupt reasonable distributive standards or over-determine broad social outcomes.

Why then should equity concerns, specifically the principle of complex equity, be brought in from the periphery of the sustainable development discourse? Severe violations of complex equity imply that there is exclusion of a significant number of citizens from power and meaningful participation in society. Widespread exclusion can stifle meaningful progress toward a more sustainable model of social and environmental development. First, complex inequalities undermine the habitus of mutual respect between citizens of a liberal democracy (Rorty 1989). The human capacities and potential of those excluded from economic, educational and other spheres are not respected because their exclusion across social spheres itself implies the absence of such capacities. When habits of mutual respect are not pervasive it becomes more likely, for example, that respect for rights of certain people, classes and communities to a clean and healthy environment is diminished. If, on the other hand, different distributive processes were allowed to fully operate in different social spheres this would lead to different outcomes for a broader spectrum of the citizenry. In these circumstances, evidence of capacity and potential would be more widespread, mutual respect would be more prominent, and fewer would be the places where environmental and other rights were not respected.

Second, if complex equality obscures differences between status and rights among citizens, complex inequality sharpens differences and makes them more durable. The exclusion and marginalization stemming from complex inequality undermines the social trust and solidarity required to affect major social change. When some social classes, groups and individuals are disconnected from influence or even meaningful participation, while a small group retains strong influence, this fragments communities, social movements and interests. Social and psychological distance prevails and inter-group trust or what has been termed "bridging social capital," becomes exceedingly difficult to build. A broad and powerful movement pushing for a meaningful sustainable development can only emerge if trust can be built across groups about the real shared sacrifices and shared benefits of a new course.

Third, exclusion also constitutes a narrowing of perspectives, experiences and knowledge about how to understand, and address through social actions, sustainability challenges. If we do not, in the words of McDaniel and Lanham in this volume, develop and maintain relationships among agents with diverse interests and perspectives, we are severely handicapped in generating approaches to complex and often non-linear challenges of sustainable development (McDaniel and Lanham, Chapter 3, this volume). Exclusion, hence, commonly involves a critical loss of information, insight, and know-how.

This brings us to a final related connection between complex equity and the greater sustainability agenda, political strategy. The broad coalition necessary to rebalance the particular form of complex inequality operative in the US case must draw in elements from a large but very diffused environmental movement and a smaller but significant ensemble of groups focused on social equity issues (unions, civil rights groups, community organizations, etc.). Environmental groups now cross a wide spectrum, but retain some air of elitism (Klingle and Taylor 2006). This poor image is in part rooted in the older historic influence of wilderness preservation and strict population management concerns on the environmental movement. Civil rights and union activist Byard Rustin is famously quoted as saying that leading environmentalists were "self-righteous elitists, neo-Malthusians who call for slow growth or no growth and who would condemn the black underclass to permanent poverty" (quoted in Tucker 1977: 49).

Since Rustin's time, environmental advocates have made great strides in framing environmental issues with sensitivity toward social justice, but the recent "anti immigration" insurgency in the Sierra Club points to residual tensions and troubling social distance. The argument that equity concerns must be at the center of building a powerful coalition for sustainable development will be further elaborated below with the case of workplace and regional sustainability projects. However, the social exclusion associated with severe and worsening complex inequality implies that an inclusionary alternative coalition can only be built by a transformative engagement that builds trust and consensus between environmental groups and interests focused on social equity. This in turn requires a sustainability discourse and action program that understands and is energetically engaged in resistance to growing inequality.

The power of money and resistance to complex inequality

The principle driver of complex inequalities in the US, as Walzer emphasizes, is the power of money. It operates in his theory to corrupt other distributions as wealth/property influence holders of political office, educational access, and other spheres of social life (Walzer 1983: 22). There is indeed ample evidence that growing inequalities in the economic realm are polluting other social spheres, accelerating the fragmentation of civic space.

There is very little debate that economic inequality has worsened as the concentration of wealth has sharply increased over the past thirty-five years. More sophisticated estimates of wealth distribution show that economic distributions have shifted dramatically toward the top one percent of households and are approaching distributions in the pre-welfare state 1920s (Piketty and Saez 2003). Pro-market conservatives have been confined to arguing that social mobility remains high (movement between economic strata over time or generations) and poor people today have higher standards of living than the middle class of fifty years ago. Startling evidence shows that social mobility in the US has gone down and that the income position of current workers increasingly mimics that of their parents (falling intergenerational mobility) (Sawhill and Morton 2007). These findings point to both increasing economic inequality and hardening of class barriers.

The fact that fewer low-income individuals face absolute material deprivation in developed countries is encouraging, but reinforces the premise of complex equity that social exclusion is not as related to unequal material conditions as to how economic inequalities shape other social outcomes.

Evidence that inequalities in wealth increasingly determine political, educational and environmental access or outcomes is strong and on many levels non-controversial. The US system of public education, financed by local property taxes, generates wildly unequal educational opportunities and is experiencing a deepening crisis as higher-income households increasingly flee to private schools. The share of students from low- and middle-income families in the top 150 universities is falling, while the share from the top quartile of family income is shooting up (Bowen *et al.* 2006). Needs-based admissions and affirmative action programs have been swamped by the influence of wealth in giving higher-income youth a leg up in early education and subsequent advantages in the complex process of college admissions (Bowen *et al.* 2006).

Increasingly divergent economic and educational distributions in turn undermine political equality and participation. Tales of special interest lobbyists actually writing legislation relating to their industry to be passed into law by legislators desperate for campaign resources are common. The ability of special interests to directly shape energy legislation, recent changes in EPA wetlands protection, regressive reforms in bankruptcy law, and pharmaceutical-friendly drug benefit legislation are only the most recent examples of corporate power over politics (Weisman and Babcock 2006). Special interest power corresponds to, and influences highly unequal participation in basic political and civic activities. Only about one-third of eligible voters turn out in midterm elections and only a bit over half in presidential elections, making the US 138th in participation among countries that conduct regular elections (Freeman 2004). Individuals in higher-income strata are also much more likely to engage in voluntary associations, contact public officials, or work on a political campaign (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005).

This evidence of complex inequality and marginalization also maps to environmental policies and exposure to environmental hazards in communities and in the workplace. A large body of literature suggests that exposure to various environmental hazards and related health effects are associated to race and income (Morello-Frosch and Jesdale 2006; Downey 2005; Hamilton 1995). Workplace exposure to environmental hazards and injury seem also to be associated with income (Robinson 1991; Dembe *et al.* 2004).

In sum, there is a preponderance of evidence that the problem of complex inequality is serious and is becoming more severe in certain social spheres as income inequality worsens. Yet given the bleak picture painted above, how can an emphasis on complex equity reposition and reinvigorate the sustainable development movement? I would argue that we first need to recognize and articulate in specific terms how equity issues are embedded in almost all environmental issues. I will discuss two important examples below in the urban context: the relationship between equity in the workplace and environmental performance of firms; and equity and the social and spatial challenges of sustainable urban planning. Once the centrality of equity concerns is articulated, new and energetic forms of trust and social capital building are essential to bind fragmented and isolated elements of the social justice and environmental movements into powerful collaborations.

Equity and sustainability: building a strong sustainable development movement in metro regions

The cases that will be used to illustrate the above arguments will be specific sustainable development challenges in US urban regions. This is an important focus for several reasons. The ways that complex inequalities shape sustainable policy and planning challenges are more legible at the local level. Also, the potential for civic engagement and coalition building may be higher in a local urban environment where face-to-face contact and access to political and other leaders is more feasible and where the direct impacts of sustainable development conflicts are easier to understand.

The living wage issue

The first issue where the links between complex equity and sustainable development can be put into relief is local living wage struggles. Efforts to pressure firms to pay a living wage have been widespread and have taken on different forms in different places. Cities such as Baltimore, Los Angeles, Tucson and others have passed living wage ordinances that require contractors, and in some cases subcontractors, doing city business to pay wages and benefits that allow workers to be self-sufficient. All firms doing city business must pay enough so that full-time workers do not need to rely on government subsidies such as Food Stamps, Medicaid or other types of public subsidies. Other cities deny any public subsidies or special regulatory treatment to firms that don't pay a living wage. Living wage campaigns have also been targeted to individual firms such as Wal-Mart in the form of resistance to new store locations or any expenditure of local taxes to facilitate firm expansions. The basic equity argument is that employers that do not pay a living wage should not be given any special encouragement, because they demean their workforce and generate social costs. Inadequate pay is unfair to other firms and the local citizenry who indirectly subsidize the firm by providing public subsides to their workers. Indigent health care, aid to low-income children, and affordable housing provision are examples of local programs in which compensation for low wages will drive up local public sector costs.

The status of the living wage issue in the broader "sustainability" conflict with big box retailers is especially emblematic of the challenges involved in bringing equity into the middle of the sustainability discourse. The big box retail model is distinguished in two ways: the organizational and sales strategy of the merchant; and the nature, size and connectivity of the building itself. Equity advocates critique low-wage, low-service mass retail strategies, while environmentalists focus on the physical attributes that contribute to high-energy consumption, heat, congestion and air pollution, and other dis-amenities. In some places like Chicago and the State of Maryland, equity and environmental advocates have come together to change store parameters and internalize social costs through wage and benefit demands (Milner 2006). Efforts have been less successful where opposition based upon planning and environmental issues is disconnected from economic and social equity advocates.

Indeed Wal-Mart's recent strategy moves can been seen as an explicit effort to split opposition.[3] They have launched a multi-billion dollar effort to "green" the company that includes green building and alternative energy initiatives for their stores, green product promotion, and other programs (Gunther 2006). Because of the tremendous scale of their operations, a 20–30 percent improvement in some Wal-Mart environmental performance measures must be welcomed. At the same time they have vehemently opposed efforts to upgrade labor standards, pay, and labor management relations. Their stock argument (mimicked by some other big retailers) is that higher wages would lead to higher prices, hurting the very groups that opponents are supposedly advocating for – Wal-Mart critiques are hence really elitist.

In response, some equity advocates have noted that market competition is not, in reality, based upon finding a single optimum cost minimization point (or equilibrium). In fact there are numerous ways to produce competitive products and services that combine low costs and high quality. Some firms operate profitably through "low-road" competitive strategies based on minimizing wage costs, input costs and other costs of doing business. Other firms can operate just as profitably by paying higher wages in exchange for higher productivity and a capacity to produce higher-quality products or services. This has been termed a "high-road" strategy of competition.

If firms could produce low-price, high-quality products and pay relatively high wages and benefits, this would undermine the claim of low-road firms that they were not adversely effecting economic distribution. The following table compares "high-road" Costco to "low-road" Wal-Mart. Costco manages to outperform Wal-Mart by paying living wages and by treating workers better, reaping higher productivity and lower worker turnover as a result.

***Table 2.1* Compensation comparisons Costco and Wal-Mart/Sam's, 2003**

	Costco	*Wal-Mart/Sam's*
Average hourly wage	$15.97	$11.42
Annual health cost (per worker)	$5,735.00	$3,500.00
Covered by health plan	82%	47%
Annual retirement cost (per worker)	$1,330.00	$747.00
Covered by retirement plan	91%	64%
Employee turnover (per year)	6%	21%
Labor and overhead costs (as % of sales)	10%	17%
Sales per square foot	$795.00	$516.00
Profits per employee	$13,647.00	$11,039.00
Yearly operating income (5 years)	10.1%	9.8%

Source: derived from, Holmes Stanley and Wendy Zelner, "Higher Wages Mean Higher Profits, but Try Telling that to Wall Street," in *Business Week*, April 12, 2004, p. 76.

A basic principle of market economics is that business firms should carry the full costs of producing or selling their products. Violation of this principle damages the operation of competitive markets. If some external costs (either social or environmental) are borne by third parties, this creates an implicit subsidy that unfairly lowers the prices of the subject firm below their true marginal costs. Requiring companies to carry the true costs of their own business operations is a fundamental requirement of the fair and efficient operation of the market.

A broader purchase of equity in the sustainable development agenda could be secured if the high-road competitive strategies could be linked to more generalized tendencies to internalize costs. The case here is not airtight, but a lot of evidence indicates that high-road strategies are associated with higher productivity, better pay and benefits, and more democratic and participatory labor management relations (Dresser 2007; Applebaum *et al.* 2000). And some evidence suggests that strategies that treat labor and material inputs as assets rather than mere inputs correlates with reduced environmental damage, and stronger firm commitments to the health and quality of life in host communities (to attract and keep skilled workers and managers) (Luria and Rogers 1997; Florida *et al.* 2001). It seems logical that firms that seek to externalize social costs will be more likely to externalize environmental costs. Organizations that depend on skilled labor, more participation and learning, and innovation would be more likely to aggressively pursue source reduction strategies to make workplaces safer and more efficient. It is further likely that high-road organizations are more inclined to implement more innovative environmental management systems such as ISO 14000 standards. These links between labor standards and environmental outcomes should persuade environmental sustainability advocates that workplace equity issues are integral to the broader environmental agenda. As shown in the "big box" organizing efforts noted on page 39, it is places where environmental and equity advocates were joined that have had meaningful success at regulating low-road development. This case strongly relates to those in Chapter 15 where social regulation of specific practices (child labor) or technologies (steamboat boilers) generated minor short-term costs but dramatically improved long-term efficiency and safety and actually promoted market growth.

Sustainable urban growth initiatives

The second nexus of environmental and equity issues that illustrates the case is sustainable urban growth management initiatives. These efforts typically involve a push for more contained urban settlement patterns, infill, open space, and reduced auto dependence. Here the relationship runs in the opposite direction from the living wage example. With sustainable growth management, environmental sustainability advocates are typically in the lead and the challenge is to incorporate the concept of complex equity to bring equity advocates into the movement. Community organizations, labor advocates, and low-income citizens often do not see the benefits of more sustainable urban forms and transit networks. Increased density, infill, transit-oriented development and even alternative energy programs may be seen as elements of gentrification or as generating additional cost burdens that low-income households can ill afford. At the same time, environmental advocates need strong and committed support from lower-income communities to successfully push through major urban sustainability projects.

Opposition to serious and systematic urban environmental sustainability initiatives comes from what could be labeled traditional urban growth regimes. In metropolitan areas, dense networks of social relations give corporate and development interests real advantages in setting economic growth agendas and related environmental policies. Urban growth regime theory as it has developed over the past two decades stresses bonds of association and interest among privileged groups in urban regions which tend to align values and norms within and between group members (Imbroscio 1997; Stone 1989; Logan and Molotch 1987). Cities are typically governed by coalitions of interest groups whereby a certain level of group coherence is translated into power over broad strategy and decision-making that is expressed in characteristic ways (Imbroscio 1997).

More traditional regimes are dominated by real estate interests and what might be called local fixed capital – firms whose investments are spatially sticky. These would include utilities, road builders, and other public and private contractors whose investment returns are shaped by local economic performance. Private sector players in the growth regime use highly unequal access to economic resources to shape distributive outcomes in the political realm – violating complex equity and excluding or limiting influence of "outside" groups. Financial resources are used to build individual ties to local political decision-makers (political contributions, revolving door relationships, and social relationships) and private interests can exert structural leverage because city officials depend on a sales and property tax base influenced by regime investment decisions.

Members of the local growth regime do, as Imbroscio states, have a "privileged voice" within the context of liberal democracy; they get the meetings, lunches, fundraisers, backroom access to political decision-makers, while other more diffuse interests groups (environmentalists, social justice advocates) get more limited "front room" access (Imbroscio 1997).

The private sector elements of a traditional regime will oppose or support urban sustainability projects based on bottom-line considerations and how these projects influence their broader freedom to operate. Efforts to encourage infill development or residential development in central business districts often offer attractive opportunities to land-based urban interests. Support for other, more environmentally significant measures such as major expansions of mass transit, greater open space requirements, urban growth boundaries or other limits on suburban development are more likely to be opposed. Equity advocates may join with traditional regime members if they view sustainability initiatives as threatening their neighborhoods, stifling job growth or adding costs onto low-income households.

The traditional urban growth regime

For practices and actions of sustainable development to change fundamental patterns of urban growth, they must influence strategic decision-making at the metro level. Otherwise, significant efforts will be trumped by the traditional regime's power to expand developable land, limit development costs, and provide housing and neighborhood characteristics in forms that will yield high returns with low risks. Concessions will be made around the edges, as developers too will be happy to wear the environmental mantle. But marginal improvements will occur in the context of continued failure of the urban system in fundamental environmental and equity terms.

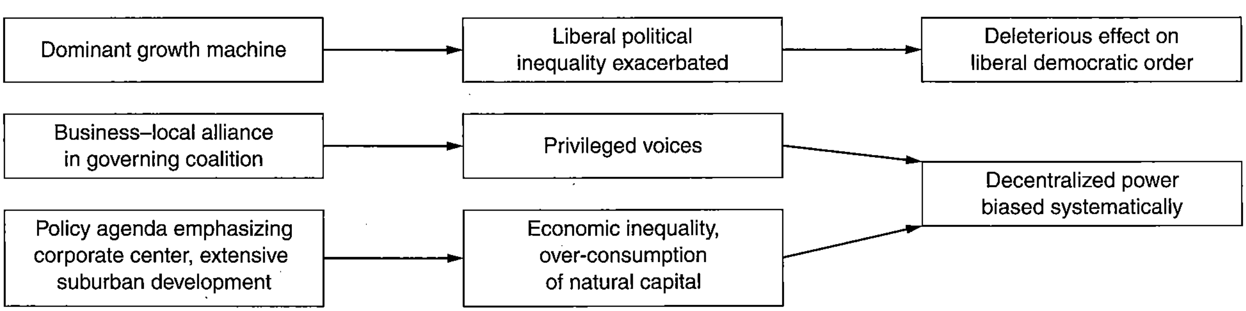

Figure 2.1
The traditional urban growth regime. Source: derived from Imbroscio (1997), reproduced with the permission of Sage Publications.

However, an important feature of regime theory that distinguishes it from structuralist accounts is that regimes are contestable; they can be reformed, reconfigured and even overturned by alternative bases of interest and power. In this context, the major changes in investment patterns and regulations needed to forge more sustainable paths of urban development require the formation of an alternative coalition of power based on environmental and social equity interests. Unless, for instance, urban densification, new transit alternatives or alternative energy initiatives are combined with aggressive affordable housing and community job goals the political feasibility of the environmental components is limited. Recognition of complex equity problems must, therefore, be at the center of efforts to build alternative power bases to contest traditional urban regimes. Building and sustaining alternative coalitions requires a radical approach to building social capital in a fragmented urban setting and understanding that change often demands explicit oppositional politics.

The need for social capital building has been a common theme in the sustainability and civic environmentalist discourses. Advocates of various stripes see a profound need to increase interpersonal associations and public participation. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* treatise is accepted with enthusiasm, but his account of the crisis of social capital is problematic for the types of trust building and coalition formation needed to advance a serious sustainability agenda (Putnam 2000). Putnam distinguishes between what he terms "bonding social capital," or associations that solidify links within groups (e.g., neighborhood groups, environmental groups, unions, local real estate councils) and "bridging social capital," his term for between-group association and trust (e.g., environmental–labor coalitions, parent–teacher associations, affordable housing coalitions) (Putnam 2000). What Putnam does not explicitly consider is that in societies with severe complex inequality some may have "surplus" social capital while others have little. Members of a conventional urban growth regime have no dearth of social capital. Large asset owners – land developers, owners and managers of firms, local infrastructure providers – have always had rich associational networks of bonding and bridging social capital.

Community, social justice, and environmental groups are at a real disadvantage. They may have strong within-group associations but very weak between-group ties and/or vertical ties to higher-level representatives (at the state or national levels). These differentials, the direct effects of complex inequality, have a strong influence on the processes and outcomes of public participation. They can lead, through a kind of path dependence toward non-participation and exclusion. The decision of individuals to devote time and energy to participation depends on a clear perception that participation can tangibly affect outcomes (Cleaver 2001; Laurian 2004). It doesn't take most people long to figure out if their participation in a specific activity or action will have any meaningful influence on outcomes. The extent to which the traditional urban regimes retain control over the strategic agenda, limiting the possibilities of alternative outcomes, the more likely broader participation and association will be limited.

Therefore, in conditions of complex inequality the initial impetus for developing new coalitions between groups (e.g., local environmentalists, social justice groups, more progressive elements of the business community) is weak. Unless galvanized by leadership or a particular local crisis, coalition building often cannot, in its early stages, demonstrate that "bridging" participation will tangibly affect outcomes. Furthermore, as much of the literature suggests, the single most important factor for developing the trust needed to build a durable coalition between groups is consistent interaction (Durlauf 2000). So the civic engagement required to build real alternative coalitions of power implies frequent meeting and joining (by those already devoting time to other particular group activities) without the prospect of immediate results.

However, there are notable cases of regime change where formerly marginalized or non-influential groups seized power over strategic decision-making. The overthrow of the traditional growth regime in Chicago by the forces supporting the election of Harold Washington as mayor in 1983 was much more than a "get our share" movement by African American and other communities of color. With an economic and political equity thrust, the agenda of the Washington coalition also featured "buy local" initiatives for city contracting, minority business development, and park and open space improvements across the city. The bridging links that formed and grew from this coalition survived Washington's untimely death in 1987 (Rivlin 1993).

The Communities Organized for Public Services (COPS) initiative in San Antonio was another case of regime overthrow. San Antonio's Anglo elite historically channeled city resources to higher-income neighborhoods on the city's north side, ignoring basic infrastructure and services in the burgeoning Latino and African American communities elsewhere. The economic growth agenda of the traditional regime focused on the promotion of San Antonio as a low-wage/low-cost place to do business. A grassroots organizing campaign was begun in 1974 to address the service, public health, and environmental crisis affecting the city's neglected west and south sides. Based on an Industrial Areas Foundation model of community organizing, COPS built bridging capital among church congregations and community groups. This initiative lead to a new regime structure that extended public services to neglected areas, led to cleanups of blighted areas, stopped a major freeway project, blocked a super mall development that would have adversely affected the aquifer, and forced the adoption of ordinances restricting polluting development (Campbell 1994).

The lessons from these examples for urban environmental sustainability include the need to redeploy social capital especially to more bridging and coalition-building activities. Further, such activities must at times be explicitly oppositional to interests that typically have a privileged voice in setting the strategic agendas of urban areas. The degree of interaction needed to build the foundation of trust for alternative coalitions requires that local environmental groups find ways to be more inclusive within their organizations, but more importantly to actively join and participate in the actions of potential coalition partners. Only when environmentalists actively participate in efforts such as local living wage campaigns will the natural links between equity and environmental improvement emerge (higher wage floors tend to force companies to save on energy and environmental costs, low wages tend to be associated with lax quality control and waste). Only when social justice groups see environmentalists on their front lines, will they fully appreciate natural links and areas of negotiation between their group agendas and efforts to preserve the environment.

The three Es revisited: elements of a coherent sustainability agenda

This account can certainly be criticized as an elite view from the rich developed world as it focuses exclusively on the US context. The problems and effects of complex inequality are certainly more stark and severe at the global level. In this context, it is important to briefly note another important contribution of Michael Walzer from his book *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and*

Abroad (Walzer 1994). In this work he notes that moral and ethical values are not, as Kant claimed, some abstract inheritance that we all share, but are rather built out of obligations and trust relationships in direct "local" social relations (families, schools, local communities). When equity concerns are seriously addressed at home, this may prepare us to address international inequality in more meaningful ways (Rorty 2007).

It could be argued that building a sustainable development movement from a critique of market outcomes and a process of social mobilization and oppositional politics will alienate many potential allies and individuals. But the argument here is that severe complex inequality is an elephant in the room that cannot be ignored in a serious sustainable development agenda. Interest group power, stemming from inordinate wealth in limited hands, has distorted market processes and dominated other social and natural realms. This unnatural hegemony of wealth didn't "just happen," it is supported by discrete interests and by a strong ideology of market fairness. Both must be confronted in clear terms if we are to shift to meaningful sustainable development processes.

On the other hand, these positions could be critiqued for not taking the power and hegemony of global capitalism seriously enough. The contemporary market economy, some argue, is hopelessly addicted to unsustainable growth and consumption. Hence, any sustainability project that views economic growth as a central goal is actually only a project for sustainable wealth creation in disguise (Gunder 2006). In my view (consistent with the concept of complex equity), the market is not intrinsically flawed as a mechanism of economic distribution. The problem is fundamentally rebalancing the market and wealth creation with public goods, healthy participation and social solidarity, and true ecological sustainability. This may be an idealistic and naïve project, but certainly not as far-fetched as the overthrow of global capitalism

The cases in this chapter demonstrate a need for a more explicit and coherent value base for inclusion, strenuous bridge building, and formation of active coalitions. Incorporating complex equity into the normative principles of sustainable development can strongly enhance communication and collective action between diverse groups with formally distinct agendas. The 3E framework of sustainable development is a perfectly workable normative framework if equity gains its proper status. This sustainable development paradigm is more than a static agenda of principles and goals as suggested by McDaniel and Lanham. It anticipates and analyzes terrains of conflict and negotiation between, for example, economic growth and environmental improvement, and equity and environmental regulation in dynamic and changing environments. The framework can furthermore accommodate subsidiary or more fine-grained conflicts like those between neighborhood livability (better schools, better neighborhood design and planning, infill densification) and gentrification. I would also argue that the 3E framework can be much more than a "nonsubstantive" banner in the terms put forward in Thompson's chapter (Thompson, Chapter 1, this volume). Tradeoffs and balances can be evaluated empirically and reasonable judgments can be based on substantive information as the living wage and urban sustainability cases suggest.

Sustainable development is a normative framework not a static blueprint, and should appropriately carry on with its own debates and conflicts. However, the basic idea of balancing and progressing along all three dimensions allows those outside the discourse to make basic and essential distinctions about what exactly sustainable development is calling us to do. And with a real concern for equity, the framework can yield legible and compelling principles:

- Sustainable development is based on the activating premise that the natural environment is under grave threat at the local, national and global levels and that future growth and development cannot occur at the expense of the environment.
- Sustainable development is based on a belief that growing inequality of access and outcomes must be reversed to sustain social solidarity, vibrant and inclusive democratic decision-making and environmental balances.
- Sustainable development strives for forms of economic growth that support greater equity and lower levels of natural capital consumption.
- Sustainable development presumes that basic individual rights of property must intrinsically be negotiated in the context of externalities and problems of the commons.

Promulgation of these 3E principles would exclude and alienate – even some who currently march under the banner of sustainability. But gains in clarity of purpose and identification of common ground would far outweigh the fleeting benefits of easy consensus.

Questions for further consideration

1. Those who promote an ecocentric view of sustainability are primarily interested in what Thompson (in Chapter 1) refers to as the "functional integrity" model. Those who promote an anthropocentric model are primarily interested in Thompson's "resource sufficiency" model. In this chapter Oden provides empirical evidence which suggests that a focus on "complex social equity" as a core dimension of sustainability might overcome the disagreement between ecocentric and anthropocentric models of sustainability. Would Thompson agree?
2. It is generally recognized that people living in poverty will, out of short-term necessity, act in ways that may be in their own immediate interest, but contrary to the long-term interests of the ecosystems where they live. If, as Oden and Walzer argue, there is no "'right' or intrinsically equitable distribution of resources," how might we decide what minimum amount of *having* will encourage citizens to *do* the "right thing"?
3. Those of us who live in liberal capitalist democracies like the United States tend to think that it is neutral and natural for wealthy citizens to routinely dominate decision-making in sectors other than banking or industry like education or the arts. Yet, when we are confronted with a theocratic society such as Iran, where spiritual figures dominate decision-making in sectors other than religion we are appalled. Are the values of liberal capitalism more fundamental to sustainable development than those of ecology, politics or religion?
4. If, as Thompson argued in Chapter 1, "solidarity" among citizens is required to achieve sustainable development, how does action toward complex social equity help to promote both "functional integrity" of the ecosystem and "resource sufficiency"?
5. Social justice groups representing the interest of the poor commonly view environmental improvements as desirable, but also as contributing to increased cost in housing or goods that the poor can ill-afford. Although Oden argues that social justice advocates and environmentalists share common interests that are distinct from "traditional growth regimes," how can these groups be brought together in practice?

Notes

1 The following four paragraphs draw heavily from pages 139–144 of their book, *Economic Analysis and Moral Philosophy*. All interpretations of their arguments, however, are the sole responsibility of the author.

2 This problem could, as Dworkin suggests, be remedied by an auction scheme where bundle elements were traded until no one envied another bundle (Dworkin 2000).

3 It should be emphasized that Wal-Mart has become a sort of whipping boy for a "low-road" retail strategy that is common to many large American retailers. While unfair on some level, the company is the largest retailer in the world and is particularly aggressive in maintaining control over its shabby labor–management relations.

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