

SUSTAINABILITY: The Ties That Bind

Introduction: What is Sustainability?

The concept of sustainability encompasses a broad vision of transformation, one rooted in the connection between natural and human systems. Sustainability recognizes that “the environment” is not a place separate from day-to-day human life. Taking a lesson from one of the founders of the environmental justice movement, the late Dana Alston, sustainability views the environment as “where we work, where we live and where we play.” Intrinsic in Tides Foundation’s definition of sustainability are the links between justice, democracy and the health of human and natural communities. At Tides we believe sustainability is a powerful way to connect disparate elements of the progressive movement and find common ground and shared value. That’s why we’ve created a new Tides Initiative aimed at fostering more expansive, strategic giving in sustainability.

For example, we can think about jobs, energy, globalization, corporate power, the growing gap between rich and poor, natural resource depletion and privatization as a laundry list of disparate issues on the progressive agenda. But looking at that set of concerns through the lens of sustainability allows for the strategic, systemic understanding of the linkages between them and offers many roads into a shared worldview. And once we share a worldview, we can begin to create shared or complementary strategies to achieve governing power. And the many elements of the progressive movement cannot be played off one another, as they too often are today.

But sustainability is a vast subject and, to fund effectively in this arena, being strategic is essential. In this case, being strategic means narrowing focus – while remembering the long-term, goal of systems transformation. In this document, we’ve selected only three possible ways to narrow focus and build a funding strategy that allows for visible short-term achievements while advancing a very long-term vision. These are not the only ways to approach sustainability funding, of course, and we hope that this outline provides the tools you need to chart your own course.

Context

It’s been more than three decades since the first Earth Day in 1970 made “environment” and “ecology” household words. Recycling, organic food, hybrid cars, energy efficient appliances, and green buildings – many elements of sustainability seem to be part of everyday life. Yet virtually every indicator of environmental quality seems to be going in the wrong direction; the world’s consumption of “stuff” keeps increasing while the gap between rich and poor grows ever larger. And while many of us take personal responsibility by making environmentally and socially sensitive purchasing choices (and the proliferation of fair traded, organic products indicates just how widespread this value is), our individual actions don’t seem to be adding up to systemic change. At the same time, this country’s generations-long commitment to end poverty, which resulted in significant social and economic gains, seems to have fallen by the political wayside. The gap between rich and poor in the US is as large as it has ever been, and is growing. (Visit www.worldwatch.org, www.americasfuture.org, www.epi.org or www.wri.org to get comprehensive information about these trends.)

Why are we headed in the wrong direction? There are many reasons, but the most obvious ones include:

- The U.S. economy (and the global economy as well) is based on resource depletion and the production, consumption and disposal of ever increasing amounts of “stuff” (much of it toxic); low cost labor; and the supremacy of short-term monetary profits. Some progressive observers say it’s a system that knows the cost of

everything, and the value of nothing; others might say it's a system that can only value that which can be monetized — which leaves out the health of people and the planet, the costs of endemic, persistent poverty, and the dangers of systems in which a small number of elite institutions and individuals make decisions that affect the future of the planet.

- Corporations and other interests that benefit from the continuation of this system virtually own the US political system at all levels. The Bush Administration and its cronies in Congress are particularly indebted and in service to these interests. These interests also control many of the governments around the world, as well as multi-lateral agencies. Over the past generation, institutionalized corruption and the mounting costs of American political campaigns threaten to destroy the grassroots democracy that is the heart of progressive organizing. On a global level, the forces of free trade and globalization — from corporations to international institutions like the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund — have made the American model of development the goal for the rest of the world at huge environmental, social and human cost.

What Needs to Change?

The short answer to that question is that the basic development paradigm that dominates our country and much of the world needs a fundamental overhaul. Breaking that transformational goal into smaller parts, the following are just four ideas for what needs to change:

- The activities or goals rewarded by economic and political systems. Today, the profligate use of resources is rewarded through tax breaks, short-term profits, the passing on of costs to the public etc. The mis-treatment of workers is rewarded by laws that limit or prohibit collective bargaining, the lack of universal health care and pension protections, low wages, etc. We need to find ways to reward sustainability and broadly shared prosperity as the ultimate goals of economic and political systems.
- Industrial processes, materials and systems that are wasteful, inefficient and toxic. These can be replaced with systems that are renewable, non-toxic, based on reuse and recycling and that minimize or eliminate waste. This transition can be jump-started by the interplay of market campaigns, corporate accountability measures, subsidies and regulations and penalties, and must encompass energy, as well as basic materials used in daily life and the larger systems (transportation, manufacturing, building, et. al.) that deliver goods, services and people.
- The United States's role as the world's largest user of energy and resources must change in order for the entire world to live in prosperity. This is not meant to be a guilt-inducing exercise, but rather a political challenge. While it's important for each of us to live in ways that comport with our values, we must also recognize that it is only through collective action that the vast systems of which we are a part can be transformed. As long as we believe (or behave as if we believe) that the accumulation of wealth and power is the goal of humanity, achieving sustainability will be impossible.

Funding Strategy One: CHANGING PUBLIC POLICY

Public policy is one the most basic and visible ways in which government acts. Some policy originates at the level of executive orders (i.e., actions presidents, governors or mayors can take on their own) but most of what we hear about is legislation — in other words, ideas advanced by legislative bodies (Congress, state legislatures, city or county councils). In addition, in many states and localities, citizens can put policy proposals directly on their ballots through the initiative process.

Today in the U.S., given the intransigence of the current Administration, working at the state and local level offers more opportunities for success. When major cities and states act, others follow — and when a critical mass of local governments act, federal action often follows. For example, some 224 US mayors have committed their cities to reducing green house gas emissions, the main cause of climate change, and are demanding that the President sign and live up to the Kyoto climate change treaty. The governors of a dozen states have committed themselves to action to reduce global warming and are also putting pressure on the Administration. These actions have been brought about by a combination of citizen action — all these elected officials have heard from their constituents — and access to tools and information to guide change.

If you are interested in tackling even the biggest global issues — climate change, energy or reducing toxic chemicals in the environment — you can do so at the state and local level. Some possible elements of a strategy:

Suggested Strategy:

- **Supporting organizations that provide state and local governments with the information and support they need to make change.** Local governments need help figuring out how to do sustainable procurement. Some organizations offer toolboxes for local development that is environmentally sustainable and based on good, decent wage jobs. Others provide how to information to governments, business and communities, and creating new frameworks for defining and quantifying what economic systems value. This kind of framework for change needs support.

- **Supporting state and local organizations that are educating and mobilizing people at the grassroots level and helping them be effective advocates for sustainability.** Many of the national environmental organizations have state affiliates or efforts and there are also independent multi-issue environmental organizations in almost 40 states. (Visit the State Environmental Leadership program www.selp.org to access these groups.) Good Jobs First and the Apollo Alliance also have links to grassroots organizing efforts. There are Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs in almost every state) and nearly all of them are building a constituency for sustainability. (www.uspirg.org). The Federation of State Conservation Voter Leagues (www.fscvl.org) and the national League of Conservation Voters (www.conservationvoter.org) are also sources of information about citizen organizing and mobilizing work — and work that holds elected officials accountable for their actions. Wal-Mart Watch (www.walmartwatch.org) is a new organization supporting unions, organizations, communities and individuals in efforts to hold this global mega-company accountable. GAIA, the Global Anti-Incinerator Alliance, helps governments at all levels find alternatives to the burning of waste, which is harmful to the environment and human health. (www.no-burn.org).

Possible Organizations to Fund

- International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives
- Center for Climate Strategies
- Apollo Alliance
- Clean Air, Cool Planet
- The Center for A New American Dream
- Good Jobs First
- Climate Solutions
- Redefining Progress

Funding Strategy Two: CHANGE HOW BUSINESS OPERATES

Many organizations (and coalitions) now focus directly on corporate behavior, using a combination of carrots and sticks to demand that sustainability become the new bottom line. In addition, in communities around the country, new kinds of businesses and industry are being created, some for-profit, some non-profit. These new enterprises are based on values of sustainability, looking at the long-term health of communities, the environment and individuals. Bypassing politics and public policy, activists have identified specific actions corporations could take to improve their environmental performance or their treatment of workers and the community. These campaigns are called “market campaigns” since their goal is to shift the practices of whole industries or markets.

For example, ForestEthics was created to protect British Columbia’s Great Bear Rain Forest. The organization began with a legal strategy aimed at halting timber cutting, but soon realized that the old growth forests being cut were being destroyed to produce pulp for paper, most of which was being consumed in the US. ForestEthics launched a campaign targeted to Staples customers and, in only a few months, got the company to vastly increase its stock of recycled paper and stop purchasing from paper companies whose pulp stock came from BC. It is now targeting the catalogue shopping industry through its Victoria’s Dirty Secret Campaign, pushing major catalogue retailers to shift to recycled paper and ultimately to shift to another form of marketing. In early 2006, more than five million acres of the Great Bear forest were protected by BC government action — in large part due to the ForestEthics campaigning. (www.forestethics.org)

Another example is Earthworks’ Dirty Gold campaign targets jewelry manufacturers, and has encouraged them to demand that their gold suppliers maintain the highest environmental and labor standards. Recently eight major companies, led by Tiffany and Co., have called upon mining companies to clean up their act, vowing to buy only “clean” gold. Earthworks’ campaigning — which targeted the brand name of Tiffany in its earliest iteration — appears to have brought about changes at the highest level of corporate decision-making. (www.earthworksaaction.org)

Other successful market campaigns include:

- Health Care Without Harm www.noharm.org
- Center for Health Environment and Justice www.chej.org
- Clean Production Action www.cleanproduction.org
- Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition/Clean Electronics Campaign www.svtc.org
- Healthy Building Network www.healthybuilding.net
- Rain Forest Action Network www.ran.org

Other organizations take a gentler approach, encouraging and supporting companies as they become more responsible and to promote innovation in materials and processes. Some of these include:

- CERES www.ceres.org
- Business for Social Responsibility www.bsr.org
- Redefining Progress www.redefiningprogress.org
- Green Biz (a free information source about green business development) www.greenbiz.com
- Green Chemistry Institute
www.chemistry.org/portal/a/c/s/1/acdisplay.html?DOC=greenchemistryinstitute\index.html
- US Green Building Council www.usgbc.org
- Forest Stewardship Council www.fscus.org
- Rocky Mountain Institute www.rmi.org
- Lowell Center for Sustainable Production www.sustainableproduction.org
- Center for Small Business and the Environment www.geocities.com/aboutcsbe

Another way to change business is to create new models of business development and activity. For middle class and wealthy communities, sustainability means having abundant options for how we live our lives. But what does sustainability mean in the context of poverty, injustice and resource depletion? What are the choices available in the face of inadequate housing, low-wage jobs, and no access to health care, and communities contaminated by poorly regulated industries? Because Tides' definition of sustainability includes meeting basic human needs, as well as environmental protection, the field of economic development, which focuses on jobs, housing and health care for families and communities, is an obvious partner for sustainability work. Some opportunities for collaborative work include:

- **Innovating and mainstreaming green affordable housing.** Enterprise's new Green Communities Program (www.greencommunitiesonline.org) is building more than 8500 green affordable housing units over the next five years and is mainstreaming the whole field of green affordable housing. The Healthy Building Network (www.healthybuilding.net) is partnering with several organizations to promote affordable green housing as the Gulf Coast rebuilds post-Katrina. This is a new area and it presents great local opportunities for funding and partnership building.
- **Supporting green community development in low income communities.** Across the nation, nonprofit community development organizations are creating new economic opportunities and good "green" jobs that pay living wages. Partnering with private sector and government, they are also training (and retraining) workers in green jobs. Some examples: The Green Worker Cooperative (www.greenworker.coop/website) and Sustainable South Bronx (www.ssbx.org) in New York City; east Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (www.workingeastbay.org) and the Ella Baker Center (www.ellabakercenter.org) in Oakland CA; Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (www.laane.org); Coop America (www.coopamerica.org); Apollo Alliance's local and regional efforts (www.apolloalliance.org). This is also a new field, and one which could use a great deal of support both to launch new organizations in new communities and to provide basic organizational capacity support to existing organizations.

Funding Strategy Three:

REACHING INDIVIDUALS TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR AND INSPIRE VALUES

We are all complicit in the status quo. Individuals, especially those with some discretionary income, can make consumer and life choices based on sustainability values. But these are effective only when they become collective organized choices — in other words, when 2500 people working together decide to change behaviors, it's more effective than 2500 people one by one, in isolation, making a change. Individual choices must be made with an understanding of the systems (public and private) that must be transformed and of the key individuals and institutions with the power to effectuate transformation. Here faith institutions, educational institutions, civil rights and unions are important “non environmental” sustainability messengers, and can often have more impact on public officials and business leaders than can “card carrying” environmentalists.

Funding in this area can support these “non traditional” messengers and collaborations or effective non-profit media. Most of the groups already mentioned above are doing powerful communications work, but can always use more assistance both to hone messages and to reach new people. In addition, groups like Interfaith Power and Light (www.theregenerationproject.org) are working congregation by congregation to encourage clergy and laity to adopt energy efficiency and to push for policies that will promote clean energy and reduce global warming. The National Religious Partnership on the Environment (www.nrpe.org), the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program (www.nccusa.org), the Committee on the Environmental and Jewish Life (www.coejl.org) and the Evangelical Environmental Network (www.creationcare.org) are all reaching people of faith on a regular basis with messages of sustainability and justice. The new Center for Religion and Ecology is compiling the key messages of all the world's greatest religions (environment.harvard.edu/religion/main.html and www.religionandecology.org).

The United Steelworkers of America have just issued a pioneering statement on the environment which, for the first time, links the health of the planet with the health of their union. Through a new partnership with the Sierra Club, the Steelworkers are trying to build and activate a new force for sustainability in this country, using communications and civic engagement strategies. This partnership is so new that it does not yet have a website, but you can visit either www.uswa.org or www.sierra.org for more information. The Apollo Alliance, mentioned earlier in this document, is another pioneer partnership of unions, environmentalists and civil rights groups aimed at promoting a sustainable energy future for this country. (www.apolloalliance.org)

At the global level, perhaps the most comprehensive vision of sustainability is put forth in the Earth Charter, the product of a global, decade- long, deeply participatory process launched after the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, which calls upon governments, institutions and individuals to: respect earth and life in all its diversity; care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love; build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful; and secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations. Around the world, thousands of people and organizations are working together to encourage governments, businesses and other institutions to endorse this visionary document. (See www.earthcharter.org for more details)

In the field of non-profit media, American Public Radio's *Marketplace* has launched a sustainability desk and is now reporting on green, responsible business development around the world (www.marketplace.org); GRIST provides regular information about the environment and sustainability through its website and daily push email (www.grist.org); *Orion* magazine offers insightful coverage of issues and ideas (www.oriononline.org); *Mother Jones* has recently beefed up its sustainability coverage (www.motherjones.com). www.Greenbiz.com and www.greenguide.org offer regular coverage aimed at business development and personal lifestyle choices, respectively. Two venerable publications: *E Magazine* (www.emagazine.com) and *Yes: A Journal of Positive Futures* (www.yesmagazine.org) have written about

sustainability issues for decades. All of these nonprofit media outlets do more than reach the “choir” — their reportage, by strategic design, influences and shapes what mainstream media covers.

Finally, funders interested in communicating sustainability can also support documentary films. The 2003 film *Blue Vinyl*, for example, has influenced hundreds of thousands of viewers to not buy vinyl products and, again by strategic design, is influencing architects, home builders, contractors and home products retailers to choose nontoxic building materials. (www.bluevinyl.org) If you are interested in connecting with documentary filmmakers, visit Working Films (www.workingfilms.org) or Active Voice (www.activevoice.net), two organizations that work with documentary filmmakers to ensure that films are seen and used as organizing tools. You might also check out local film and video foundations that support independent film makers.

Final Thoughts

All three of these avenues for change require organizations that can mobilize individuals who are knowledgeable about problems, solutions, and where the power to change resides. Doing so requires strategic communications strategies that reach mainstream as well as niche media; civic engagement strategies; and long-term accountability strategies. Please take a look at the Civic Engagement Strategies Paper to learn more about this area and how it relates to sustainability.

As human beings grapple with climate change, the growing gap between the rich and poor, globalization, increasing demand for scarce resources, population growth and profound demographic change, a borderless war on terror, and infinitum, the need to move beyond piecemeal solutions and single issues has never been greater or more urgent. Sustainability — in all its meanings — offers a path forward.