

Frontiers of Social Action

Moral Economy Symposium Discussion Paper

Right relationship can only be achieved by respecting the Earth's ecological limitations and the universal human right to life's essential resources. Leaders of the industrialised countries have failed to deliver on both these counts, adhering instead to unsustainable methods of managing the planet and our relationship with it. Despite their failure, these practices are now so institutionalised that working towards a whole earth economy will require a momentous shift in the prevailing assumptions and values of policymakers, international institutions and the global public.

It is an ecological and moral imperative that an engaged and informed civil society persuades policymakers to prioritise cooperation and sharing over self interest and competition, which have been the trademarks of the global economy. Campaign efforts should be directed towards governments - to remind them to prioritise the public interest and the environment first, and to shake them free from excessive corporate influence. Once governments accept the need to secure the public good, they can move forward more democratically and cooperate with each other to create a framework for a sustainable world economy.

Within this framework, it is of course important that individuals re-orientate their lifestyles towards living more simply in order to contribute to the solution. But even large-scale shifts in consumption will not solve the world's escalating environmental problems. In many cases, people have demonstrated their ability to lead on environmental issues, whereas world leaders have utterly failed to take the necessary action. Stronger legislation must be directed at the root causes of environmental, social and economic problems - and the responsibility for change should not be solely placed on the public.

Local Movements

Social action and peoples' movements at the local level will naturally form an important part of any attempt to change government priorities. We can draw inspiration from groups such as Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST), or La Via Campesina (key actors in the food sovereignty movement). Such groups manage to incorporate a social voice for the marginalised and dispossessed sectors, galvanise large numbers of people into action, and direct pressure at policymakers. Since originating as rural farmer's movements in Latin America in the mid 1990s, they now have much wider international support.

Local civil society groups in every country that are already actively pressing for change at all levels need to coalesce around common agendas, and agree to work cooperatively to propagate and endorse common campaign messages. This is necessarily a colossal task, but one that is made easier in this age of advanced communication and accessible technology.

The ever-growing networks of local exchange systems, cooperatives, food banks, social enterprises, and public interest groups, are a further assurance that growing numbers of local groups share a similar desire and are willing to work together for change. Although many campaigns for social justice

remain disparate and disconnected through a lack of workers and funds, forming alliances and sharing resources can reinforce their messages and provide much needed impetus and support.

Education and Participation

Despite a growing awareness of the need for 'Right Relationship', the vast majority of people in rich countries seem unaware of the underlying causes of the current ecological and economic crises, or the urgent need for change. However, people do want to understand the reasons behind such social and global issues as unemployment, debt, disenfranchisement, poverty and inequality, and this information must be communicated in simple and accessible terms as part of a global educational endeavour. Civil society organisations, many of which are well established and experienced communicators, have an important role to play here by informing and educating the global public on environmental and economic matters.

The intention should ultimately be to facilitate greater public participation in political life. Once people are informed and empowered to participate, networks and groups can be formed around multiple issues, and an effort must again be made to unite these disparate groups around common agendas. This is already occurring through the network of World Social Forums, and participant groups are extensively using electronic lists of members, newsletters, websites and social networking sites to further their cause and form coalitions.

A criticism often levied at the World Social Forums and its message of 'Another World is Possible', is that it lacks direction and unity, and that it falls short of strongly advocating what this other world should be like or how it should be created.¹ Whilst there may be truth in this criticism, it is undeniable that the WSF remains successful as a growing movement, providing a field of education, networking opportunities and a sense of solidarity for an immensely diverse group of concerned citizens and organisations. Furthermore, there is potential for concepts like 'Right Relationship' and calls to 'Share The World's Resources' to galvanise coordinated action amongst these diverse groups – most of whom already implicitly subscribe to these broad principles.

Creating a Platform for Change

The key to any international mobilisation is establishing a broad and inclusive platform. STWR advocate 'sharing' as one possible platform that can unite disparate groups such as those working towards environmental, economic and social justice, democracy or world peace.

The principle of sharing is closely related to the idea of 'Right Relationship'; both concepts share a common goal and are rooted in ideas of morality, fairness and respect for the earth's natural limits. Sharing is not an 'ism' or an ideology but a natural law of economy, a simple process that, when implemented on a global scale, can ensure that right relationship is established between people, and with the planet.

Successful campaigns such as Make Poverty History, the Jubilee Debt Campaign, and Stop the War amongst others, offer an example of diverse groups successfully forming coalitions around an inclusive platform. Whilst many of the demands of these campaigns may not have been met, the increasing numbers of such campaigns and their successful deployment demonstrate the growing effectiveness of the so called 'global justice movement'.

It is ultimately the responsibility of governments to enact legislation to mitigate emissions, resource over-usage and over-production; to curb advertising and the influence of corporations on public and political life; and to revoke a blinkered adherence to excessive competition and endless economic

growth. But they will not do so unless sufficient pressure is brought to bear on them through mass campaigns that coordinate and mobilise world public opinion – the up and coming ‘superpower’ in world affairs.

¹ For more information see Adam Parsons, [Mobilising ‘World Opinion’](#), STWR, July 2007