

## DEMOCRACY & SUSTAINABILITY FEEDBACK

In the build-up to the 'Democracy & Sustainability' event, SustainAbility polled its Faculty members (<http://www.sustainability.com/network/faculty.asp>) to see what they thought. Here are some of the responses.

### GANDHI, MAO AND TATA

**Q: Can we vote our way to a sustainable future for a world of 9-10 billion people—or are new forms of leadership (even forms of dictatorship) going to be necessary?**

**A:** Yes to voting, yes to new forms of leadership and no to dictatorship. However, the question itself is too far down stream of the real problem.

Let's start by asking what are the power plays behind public discourse and perception? For example, here are the questions that haunt us in India. Why was Mahatma Gandhi able to build a popular, reaching-every-home, movement with symbols like a pinch of salt and the spinning wheel? Why have we, late 20th century activists, failed to foster a ground swell against destructive projects and policies that masquerade as development – at least on the scale required to actually make a change? I don't have any ready answers.

But one thing is clear: it's a cop-out to just blame the electoral process and dysfunctional party system. The buy-in for a particular model of "progress" goes much deeper and it cuts across classes and types—rich and poor, business people and politicians. We all collude in pretending that the king has cloths on.

**Q: Is China—with little need to consult its people—or India—with its flawed democracy—best placed to move towards more sustainable forms of development?**

**A:** I don't know enough about China to make a comparison. But in principle this is a no-brainer. Flawed open system wins over closed system in which sustainability = authoritarian rule.

**Q: Are the time-scales of democratically elected governments appropriate for delivering sustainable development?**

**A:** But are we sure that governments, MORE than markets, are driving us over the edge? Tata Motors is about to put a car on the roads which is going to cost less than some two-wheelers. Stock market, media, general public and politicians are united in their euphoria over this 'innovation'—it is what people need and want. Neither the corporation nor the parliamentary system are inherently geared to tackle the key

question: what are the optimum ways of organizing and facilitating (or discouraging) mobility over the next fifty years?

**Q: If not, what needs to be done—and by whom?**

**A:** What I long for is freedom from two extremes. On one end is the fluff about making ‘everyone an entrepreneur’ which does not tackle the structural death-traps. At the other end is the armed Maoist insurrection (spread across about one-third of India) which sees only structural injustices and none of the emerging possibilities and opportunities. So the ‘new leadership’ would be those who not only start a conversation about this at the three-way intersection of Society-State-Business but ALSO grapple with power relations. Apologies for stating the obvious but I do so in the hope of hearing from those who have ideas on the ‘how’.

**Rajni Bakshi, SustainAbility Faculty member, Mumbai, India; author, *Bapu Kuti: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi***

#### **THIS FORM OF DEMOCRACY WON'T DELIVER SUSTAINABILITY**

If Tom Burke and Tim Smit can do no more than state the dilemma or adumbrate idealistic solutions, what more can we lesser mortals do? The choice seems to be between platitudes and silence in response to the most challenging problem of our time. So for the moment – probably for longer, if not indefinitely - I am stumped for anything worth saying, but have never believed in silence. Sure, dictatorships or a new Black Death could give us physical sustainability, and nuclear war would leave a planet which, being spared the current depredations of mankind, could ultimately recover (which doubtless the Gaia thesis would assert), but no one is going to advocate any of these. I suspect we may have to work with a scenario in which physical sustainability is not achievable (indeed we may already be past the tipping point) and that therefore all resources should be put towards social sustainability by improving world education, removing injustices and economic inequalities, and cushioning the impact of climate change on those most affected by it. As an amateur lepidopterist I would lament the disappearance of species, but this may be the only option open to us. This would require a greater international effort through the United Nations than we have ever before seen; but physical sustainability and what we currently interpret and practise as democracy at national level are clearly incompatible.

**Sir Geoffrey Chandler, SustainAbility Faculty member, Founder-Chair, Amnesty International UK Business Group and Former Director General, UK National Economic Development Office, UK**

#### **GOVERNMENT THINKING TOO SHORT TERM**

I don't believe that government is going to lead us out of our problems - democratic or not. Democratic governments inevitably think in short time frames and are paralyzed by having to appeal to the electorate. Political dictators may have a longer term vision but their primary interest is themselves—more money, more power, more ego. So what we need is innovative and inspiring individuals directing their businesses to creating a more sustainable future and getting the rest of us to buy into that .....

**Julia Hailes, co-founder of SustainAbility and Faculty member; author, *The New Green Consumer Guide***

## TAKE A LOOK AT CUBA

I believe that the terms 'Democracy' and 'Dictatorship' are not appropriate here. If we look for an example of a sustainable society, the leading example is Cuba. The agriculture is carbon-free, the health service is excellent, and the privations have been shared with much more equity than is common.

Given all the special features of Cuba's history, it seems clear that the society is distinguished by its social morality. Castro's motivations are of no concern here, nor the negative aspects of his rule; what is significant is how his policies have worked out successfully through the decades of struggle for survival.

It would be comforting to believe that social morality is fostered by formally democratic political institutions. That may well be the case theoretically. Certainly democracy is less vulnerable to totally corrupt rulers or to the instability consequent on regime change. But this general tendency has so many exceptions, that we would do better to accept social morality as a positive factor for sustainability, in its own right.

Another recent case, this time of unsustainability, shows how political distinctions can be irrelevant. It appears that the world wheat crop is under threat from a fungal infection. This can be understood as inevitable for a global monoculture which is brittle against pathogens. The causes are the capture of agriculture by the multinationals, and then their neglect of protection for the product they created and forced on the world's farmers. (See *New Scientist*, 15 March 2008, p. 5.) Here we see the same 'subprime' mentality that threatens sustainability on the world's financial markets; we might call that social immorality.

**Jerome Ravetz, SustainAbility Faculty member, Associate Fellow, James Martin Institute for Science & Civilization, University of Oxford, UK**

## PARTICIPATION IS KEY

An exciting area, especially for a Swiss (we believe to have a special, very direct kind of democracy). My basic assumption and belief is that nobody will know better what the population needs and wants than the population itself.

**Q: Can we vote our way to a sustainable future for a world of 9-10 billion people— or are new forms of leadership (even forms of dictatorship) going to be necessary?**

**A:** Democracy is not just about voting but rather about involving people. It is about participation. There is no way to imagine sustainable development without participation. Already the Rio 1992 Agenda 21 protocol emphasized that participation is (among the consideration of ecological, social and economic issues and their interdependencies) a core issue for sustainable development. Democracy is an institutional setting which organizes participation and how participation takes place.

Depending on what kind of democracy we are envisaging, indirect, representative, or direct democracy, etc., we have a very different level of participation. In my view sustainable development, and especially the social aspects of sustainable development are only possible with a substantial step towards more democracy and more direct democracy. I cannot imagine that a clique of professional politicians and bureaucrats will know better what the people want than the people themselves.

**Q: Are the time-scales of democratically elected governments appropriate for delivering sustainable development?**

**A:** There is no optimal time scale in general. With exceptions a fixed time scale will always fail to be optimal (one reason why current forms of democracy are confronted with sustainability problems). The time scale should thus depend on the support of the population and the parliament. Ideally the government can rule as long as it is supported by the majority of the population and the people should always be able to require for a new vote when they feel betrayed or a need for change. Any democratic system that requires cooperation and consensus processes among all or a majority of the parties in the parliament will be superior in its stability of decisions than democracies with changing governments throwing the political “steering wheel” around after a four or five or seven or whatever year period. Not just social, but also environmental issues are mostly considered better when more parties and social groups can participate.

**Professor Stefan Schaltegger, SustainAbility Faculty member; Professor of Management, Centre for Sustainability Management (CSM), Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany**

**DEBATE IS MANDATORY**

Certainly there are serious and challenging questions around how effective democracy can improve or even speed up sustainable development. To make a significant debate

about the theme is mandatory—to think new and think fresh with courage from the outset, with no ideological bias.

**Ricardo Silva, SustainAbility Faculty member; President, UniEthos and Instituto Ethos, São Paulo, Brazil**

## **CHINA IS A TEST CASE**

Very powerful thoughts in your email. In fact, it is very timely for China's leadership, who are struggling. For example, they are trying to understand what NGOs are and where they fit in. This is becoming a big challenge to the central government. So how can this "uneducated national system" open its door to these "government-uncontrolled organizations"? How can we help local offices, who hardly understand the difference between an NGO and a religion, to work with NGOs? After 20 years fighting with economy, China is now beginning to think about doors, keys and what it needs to open next.

**Xinran (Xue), Founder of the charity 'The Mothers' Bridge of Love' and author of *The Good Women of China, Sky Burial, What Chinese Don't Eat* and *Miss Chopsticks*, UK/China**