Chapter 1 – Background theory and worldview of participatory sustainability

Participatory sustainability is strong sustainability

Sustainability means continuity, persistence, endurance, survival. The opposite of sustainability – *unsustainability* – simply means not persisting; in other words, death, extinction, disappearance.

In 21st century human society, sustainability has come to refer to maintaining current economic and political systems – including economic growth – while keeping in mind the needs of the environment as much as possible. In contrast to such "weak sustainability", advocates of "strong sustainability" say we must significantly alter our economic systems and probably other social systems as well in order to accommodate the needs of natural systems and future generations.

The common definition of sustainability from the Brundtland report[1] – meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs – can be interpreted from the perspective of either strong or weak sustainability.

Weak sustainability rests on predominantly Western ideas about development in which the goal is for everyone in the world to have the kind of material prosperity that characterizes middle and upper middle class people in Europe and the U.S. "Sustainable development" in this paradigm seeks a kind of economic growth that could produce and maintain such material prosperity. This worldview assumes tribal and traditional agricultural cultures are less developed and need to be brought up to date and "integrated into the global economy".

This linear-developmental model rests fundamentally on the perspectives and capacities of elites rather than the sensibilities of ordinary people, so tends towards elitism and top-down management. However, scientific understanding of complexity as well as the pressures of global competition provide a nascent counter-trend that leans towards cooperation and self-organization even within corporations and governments.

Advocates of strong sustainability suggest that sustained material affluence of the kind envisioned by weak sustainability advocates is unrealistic on a finite planet. They believe that its pursuit will

not only destroy the living systems upon which the economy depends, but also undermine the development of cultures and lifestyles that are intrinsically more meaningful, happy and sustainable. They see value in all forms of society – tribal, traditional agricultural, and technological-industrial. Our developmental challenge, from the strong sustainability perspective, is to integrate the best of all these forms of human civilization into new and better forms that function well within the physical constraints of nature.

Thoroughly addressing this challenge would require a far greater respect and even reverence for the non-material dimensions of nature and humanity. Strong sustainability implies a radical shift in the way we see the universe and our place in it, accompanied by shifts in our cultures and social systems. Included in this vision is effective support for the healthy continuity of more fundamental forms of human society as found in tribal and traditional agricultural communities, as well as new forms of technological-industrial society that are environmentally and socially benign.

Participatory sustainability is a form of strong sustainability that provides compelling guidance for sustaining human communities and societies within a 21st century scientific understanding of complex adaptive living systems and a deeper realization of human needs that transcend the reductionist views of economic materialism and consumerism.

Acknowledging interrelationship and participation

The participatory sustainability worldview is grounded in certain assumptions about participation and interconnectedness, perhaps most notably in their ubiquity and inevitability.

We live in a participatory universe. We are all participating in each other's lives and in the lives of everyone and everything else – whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, whether we want to or not.

All entities and dynamics are related to all other entities and dynamics. Although in any given case some relationships may be considered more obvious and important than others, certain subtle overlooked relationships often turn out to be at least as important as more conspicuous ones. For example, much discussion of climate change notes how rising sea levels will impact lowland populations, properties and cities, but little attention is given to how drought and rising seas will impact nuclear power plants which are mostly situated by rivers, lakes and oceans because they need continual massive water supplies to cool their reactors. Or consider how the self-immolation of an otherwise unknown street vendor – inspired by his frustrated relationships with authorities – set off the uprising known as the Arab Spring.

Even the most remote factors are always at play and although their effects may be virtually invisible, our humble assumption of and respect for their presence can help us maintain a state of alertness to notice faint but relevant signals before things get out of hand.

Relationships affect functioning. Relationships support or undermine our ability to survive and thrive. The action of one entity or dynamic shapes the contexts in which other entities and dynamics function. Relationship is the dynamic through which evolution functions, and thus our need for and consciousness of relationships are deeply embedded in our DNA and psyches.

Almost all relationships are at least two-way, interactive and co-creative. If predators are too successful, their prey vanish and the predators starve. If prey are too wily to be caught, predators die and the population of prey explodes into starvation. To sustain themselves, predators and prey must be in a basic, if fluctuating, balance.

This pattern of interactive relationships is ubiquitous. Diverse elements and life forms co-create our atmosphere, oceans, and climate in dynamic proportions that support or undermine human civilization. Passivity and oppression feed each other. Audiences and musicians energize each other. Polarized values like equality and freedom dance eternally around an invisible balance point. Persistent growth erodes the resources that support it, undermining growth. All aspects of reality participate in and co-create all other aspects.

Humanity is an important part of all this – especially when it comes to collectively sustaining ourselves. We are all playing roles in the development of technology, race relations, gravitational fields, children, economies, planetary weather, and even the health of people in Tasmania in the year 2057. Every single person in the world unknowingly conspires with every single green plant to maintain the right mix of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to sustain life. Every citizen who stays home on Election Day participates – along with every voter – in electing their president, prime minister, mayor or other representative. Everyone who picks up trash on the street – or leaves it lying there – plays a role in determining whether or not the next piece of trash falls on the street.

Our beliefs, cultures and social systems shape our participation and extend the consequences of our actions in ways that can be hard to see. Our belief in the competence of a child may itself increase the competence of that child. A culture which assigns status to financial wealth and material possessions will promote our collective destruction of natural systems and exhaustion of vital resources, though we may individually experience that as simply shopping for Christmas. A regional development plan that features widespread suburbs will cause its subsequent occupants to rely heavily on automobiles and thus, in their daily life, to unconsciously influence the geopolitics around energy-rich countries, the condition of the atmosphere, and the livelihood of farmers a world away as floods, droughts and unpredictable weathers related to climate disruption destroy their crops, which in turn raise the cost of papayas and rice in distant cities and suburbs.

We are active participants in everything that happens, even when we think we're "doing nothing" and even when we're totally ignorant of what's going on. We are never merely irrelevant observers, spectators or bystanders or "just living our lives". Each of us is right now actively participating in the world’s unfolding into its future.

Co-creating sustainability

Participatory sustainability involves aligning ourselves with reality and acting in accordance with the fundamental interrelatedness and co-creativity of life.

Sustainability involves thinking and sensing beyond linear causation which acts as if any one cause causes only one thing and as if any one event or condition has only one cause or only a few readily identifiable causes. Sustainability also involves thinking and sensing beyond separateness which acts as if we are not connected to – and can thus ignore – each other and the rest of creation. And thus it involves taking responsibility for our participation in the larger field of life – the all-encompassing web of mutuality – which so powerfully shapes our destinies for good or ill, just as we influence that web of life. And it involves waking up to these things, becoming more conscious of the truth of interconnectedness and our role in it.

We can co-create sustainability, participating in activities that align us, our communities and our social systems with the fundamental interrelatedness of life – supporting the dynamics of life that we depend on to support us. Or we can co-create unsustainability, participating in activities that ignore, degrade or devastate the mutuality of life, thereby cursing our lives and our future. Or we can do some mix of these which, by definition, will only work to a certain extent and for a limited period of time. To the extent sustainability (persistence) is partial, it is not actually sustainable (lasting).

Whatever we do, we don't get to *not* participate. We are participants by virtue of our existence in this densely interconnected world. To paraphrase the Beatles, although we feel as if we're in a play, we are anyway. And, like their Fool on the Hill, when we see the sun going down, we would be wise to step back and use the eyes in our heads (and in our scientific models and our sensitive hearts) to see the world spinning 'round, and to see ourselves as part of that life-supporting dance...

The scope of participatory sustainability

Participatory sustainability embraces many dimensions of human activity, notably including:

- Individual and collective narratives, lifestyles and behaviors;
- Communication, information, knowledge, and learning systems, including education, science, research, media, and journalism;
- Economic systems, including all forms of production, use, distribution and service - and the resource systems and cycles upon which they depend; and
- Decision-making and implementation systems, especially politics and governance.

And, as we have shown, all these *are* participatory; all of us are co-creating all of them all the time. Participatory sustainability calls on us to make them all *consciously* participatory, to design into

them ongoing (sustained) conscious participation that serves systemic health and resilience (sustainability). This book will particularly focus on the last – politics and governance – primarily because it shapes (and properly should shape) all the others. But it is also true that all the others, in their roles in this participatory universe, also shape politics and governance, and thus cannot be neglected.

Participatory democracy for sustainability

If we define democracy as rule by the people (rather than by some particular democratic mode such as voting or representation), we can see the importance of democracy for sustainability.

Perhaps most significantly, democracy generates legitimacy of governance. In democratic political theory "legitimacy" derives from a population's willingness to abide by a decision, vision, leader or governing system – even if they disagree with aspects of it – because they have had (or could have readily had) a role in influencing it. To the extent that their voice can play a role in shaping what happens, they "buy into" that direction and its implementation. Their willing cooperation reduces the amount of force, resources and external incentives governments must invest to align the public to communal policies, making it potentially more efficient and sustainable than purely top-down approaches.

Another source of "buy-in" is how much government behaviors and policies make sense to the populace. Democracy ideally provides an environment rich with good information, diverse perspectives, productive conversations and other resources with which diverse citizens with diverse values and interests can deliberate towards more united public judgment, or what we could call true common sense and actionable common ground which serves the well-being of all.

A culture of deliberative public judgment further supports sustainability through the collective intelligence capacity it generates, enabling communities and societies to respond resiliently to the changing internal and external challenges they face. This capacity enhances sustainability to the extent we ensure that society's information systems and deliberations help citizens take a long term view and understand systemic dynamics and interconnections. This enables true, legitimate public wisdom to emerge, for the public then has the expanded insight needed to sustain a co-creative relationship with more of the complex evolving web of mutuality around them.

Note that mythos and manipulation often play a role in generating consent, especially in more top-down governance systems. But top-down manipulation strategies do not benefit to the same extent from the distributed collective intelligence and engagement generated by more participatory approaches.

Systems that support both cooperative participation and deeper understanding help distribute collective perception and implementation initiatives more broadly throughout the population, reducing the need for external management and formal bureaucracy. As this capacity for self-organization becomes increasingly embedded in the culture and functioning of society, that

society's ability to foresee, monitor, and respond well to diverse challenges and opportunities scattered throughout its evolving complex environment rises as well. Their collective sense of agency expands with confident innovation tempered by humility and the caution, light touch, and often sacred sensibility indigenous to those who recognize the basic mystery and aliveness of the participatory universe within which they are immersed. The factors described in this paragraph are arguably the most potent in ensuring ongoing societal sustainability.

Rapidly developing social, digital, information, and communication technologies can enable increasing scope and sophistication of collaborative participation in making a society not only more sustainable but more vibrant. These technologies can be integrated to augment diverse modes of engagement – face to face and virtual, local and global, synchronous and asynchronous – with greater opportunity for leadership and expertise to find their most useful manifestations, rising and subsiding in response to evolving needs and circumstances. Such capacities for sustained self-governance provide a level of complexity comparable to that of the complex realities and issues we face, allowing intelligent responsiveness throughout the relevant systems.

A participatory approach to sustainability also addresses the diversity of definitions, views on and approaches to sustainability. Instead of serving as an impediment for action, this diversity can inform and be collectively digested by the society's thinking, dialogue and action as described above, moving through relevant complexity into greater insight and capacity, evolving as it goes.

Participatory sustainable lifestyles

All the above can be considered the *active* aspect of participatory sustainability. On the *receptive* face of participatory sustainability we find its greatest attractor: social systems and lifestyles that hold tremendous potential for meaning, agency, joy, and belonging – qualities that are difficult to find in the mediated, alienated forms of engagement that characterize top-down economics, politics and governance.

As people find technologically-enhanced life-serving ways to satisfy their most basic needs more directly and collaboratively – including sharing, caring, co-creating, gifting, simplifying and taking responsibility for what they love, individually and collectively – they naturally find greater satisfaction in life. They become less dependent on powerful, heavily monetized and increasingly unstable social forces, systems and institutions beyond their control. They become more engaged with the alive reality and abundance of natural and human communion, experiencing a shift in their center of gravity from compulsively acquisitive materialism to a deep and creative partnership with the life in and around them, which they come to value in a very profound and personal way. We see this in the emerging voluntary simplicity movement. We would tend to find a remarkable quality of life wherever participatory sustainability has taken root in an individual, group or community.

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