

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#731 - A Vision Statement -- Final Part

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Can people agree what a sustainable and desirable U.S. might be like? (See REHN #727, #728, #729, #730, <http://iee.umces.edu/ESDA/>, and www.futuresearch.net.)

Here is part 5 (the final part) of a draft vision statement issued by a group that has tentatively named itself ESDA (Envisioning a Sustainable and Desirable America). The ESDA group says, "We hope you can take the time to read our vision, and offer us your comments. Would you like to live in this world? Are there elements of our vision with which you disagree? Are important pieces missing? Please send your feedback to farley@cbl.umces.edu," the E-mail address of Josh Farley at University of Maryland.

The draft vision statement is organized into five parts: Worldviews, Built Capital, Natural Capital, Human Capital and Social Capital. In our last installment, we began publishing the "Social Capital" section, which continues here:

Thus, for our vision of local production for local markets to work, social capital must be strong. As discussed in the section on built capital, the very physical structure of communities will work to create that social capital. Abundant community spaces, parks, and recreation areas will stimulate social interaction, build friendships, and generate a sense of responsibility towards neighbors and community. With single occupancy vehicles almost gone and people living in smaller communities, just getting from place to place will bring us in close contact with our neighbors. In America 2001, public transportation is primarily found only in large cities, and fellow passengers are strangers, not neighbors. Under these circumstances, public transportation does little to build social capital, but this will not be the case in 2100.

America in 2100 will maintain the ethnic and cultural diversity that currently enriches our nation. Some neighborhoods will coalesce around different ethnicities and cultures, and these too will serve as sources of social capital. However, America will have rid itself of the racism, sexism, regionalism and other prejudices that are all too prevalent today.

Americans will have more time for family, and family life will be characterized by more balanced gender roles.

The process of government will itself create social capital. America in 2100 will no longer be a weak representative democracy, but a strong, participatory one. In a participatory democracy, the people must discuss at length the issues that affect them to decide together how they should be resolved. In today's world of high-pressure jobs, little free time, and large communities of anonymous strangers this approach to government seems impractical, unwieldy and too demanding. In our vision of the future, with smaller communities of neighbors, a far shorter work week, and engaged, active citizens, participatory democracy will be perceived as a privilege of citizenship and not an onerous chore. Of course, for this to work presupposes that civic education forms an essential part of development of human capital from childhood on. This approach to government will be particularly effective at the local level. As citizens come together in regular meetings to discuss the issues and work together to resolve them (even when substantial conflict exists), it will create strong bonds of social capital, and will play an essential role in forging a sense of community. Government of course implies action, and action implies purpose. Purpose must be defined by the people, who in these civic meetings will also forge a shared vision of the future to guide their actions. This vision cannot be static, but must adapt to new information and new conditions as they emerge.

Of course, not all issues can be decided on the local level. Institutions are required at the scale of the problems they address. It is at the local level where people will feel the consequences of ecosystem change, for example, but causes may be distant, perhaps in other countries. On the national level it is not feasible to bring together millions of people to discuss the issues and decide on

actions, so some form of representation will be required. But if representatives are chosen through direct participation by people to whom they have strong social ties and obligations, these representatives are far more likely to truly represent their communities and not some large corporation that funds their rise to power.

Conclusion

We hope you share our vision for a sustainable and desirable America. Our goal is to create a shared vision, and if you do not believe this future America would be a desirable place to live, we need your feedback. We would also appreciate your positive feedback. The envisioning process is dynamic, and we have only just begun. [End of draft vision statement.]

RACHEL'S Editor's Comments

So there you have it, a vision statement of what the U.S. might be like 100 years from now. (See also REHN #727, #728, #729 and #730.) It is only a first draft. Please pull together your thoughtful comments on this vision and E-mail them to farley@cbl.umces.edu, which is the address of Josh Farley at University of Maryland. They will be posted on the web at <http://iee.umces.edu/ESDA/> for others to consider. A vision statement must evolve as time passes, adapting to new circumstances, new perceptions, new possibilities.

Several people have sent us comments already, and the comment I want to address here is this: How can we get there? What could we be doing to promote a U.S. that works for us and our descendants ecologically, economically, morally, culturally, and politically?

Naturally, there are many things that we can each be doing to bring about a different world. But I believe one key idea underpins them all, and has been badly neglected: locally-based democratic decision-making, as discussed briefly in this week's installment of the vision statement.

I believe real democracy is the thing we need the most, and the thing we study and work on the least. Perhaps we work on "democracy" so little because we already live in a democracy. We think of the U.S. as a "democratic" country, but what does democratic participation in the U.S. really mean? It means paying your taxes, occasionally voting for one candidate or another, and the rest of the time minding your own business. This is what Benjamin Barber[1] calls our "thin democracy" --it was designed by the Founding Fathers to pretty much exclude most people.

But times have changed. We no longer live on a planet that seems infinitely large and mostly uninhabited. Now we are faced with adjusting our lives to new realities -- a planet that is filling up with people, a planet of finite size with finite resources (some renewable and some not), with a finite capacity to absorb wastes. Now the main task we all face is how to arrange our lives so that our communities (and nations) can become sustainable, meaning they can sustain their members into the foreseeable future. (If you don't think the question of finite resources is important, ask yourself if the recent atrocities in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania would have been as likely to occur if the industrialized nations weren't deriving 54% of their energy from the Middle East.)

Because we do not know the limits of ecosystems, we can never define precisely what "sustainable" means. We have to discover -- and invent -- its meaning as time passes. One book seems especially relevant here: **THE LOCAL POLITICS OF GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY** by Thomas Prugh, Robert Costanza and Herman Daly (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000; ISBN 1-55963-744-7). I'm going to call this book PCD, shorthand for the names of its authors. Everyone who cares about sustainability would benefit by reading this short, meaty book.

PCD points out that the problems we face -- such as

overconsumption, overpopulation, fossil fuel use, and destruction of species -- are not mainly technical problems. If they were, we'd be able to solve them within a few years. The systems involved are complex and interconnected in ways that make their behavior inherently unpredictable.

"As a result," says PCD, "the politics of communities' and nations' efforts to address their sustainability problems is much more important than any technical expertise they can muster. There are experts aplenty, but we cannot simply consult them for the 'best' solutions, because nobody can know what those solutions are in any complete or final sense. The solutions must be explored and tested through a process of continuous adaptive learning. Deciding which options to try means making political choices that affect everyone and require wide support and engagement. A generation after its coinage, the slogan Power to the People takes on a new meaning," says PCD (pg. xiv).

PCD goes on: "Because there can be no permanent solutions in a world that is ecologically and culturally dynamic, these choices will have to be made again and again as circumstances evolve. Therefore, moving toward sustainability will require a radically broadened base of participants and a political process that continuously keeps them engaged. The process must encourage the perpetual hearing, testing, working through, and modification of competing visions AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL.... The key seems to be structuring political systems so that people's decisions matter.... We believe communities are the primary locus of responsibility for creating a sustainable world. The admonition to Think Globally, Act Locally retains its wisdom despite years of bumper-sticker overexposure. Directed sustainability[2] will come about in neighborhoods or not at all" (pg. xv).

What does all this mean? It means the most important issue we all face is democratic control of our lives. In a very real sense, all the issues of poverty, environment, justice and community boil down to failures of democratic participation. When we complain about corporate power and the destructive effects of "globalization" we are complaining about the absence of democratic decision-making (decision-making by those who are affected by the decisions).

We all want democracy. But how much time do we devote to studying how to make democracy really work? How much effort do we spend trying to re-arrange our local communities so that we make decisions by talking together? These are good questions.

In sum, how can we turn our vision of a sustainable and desirable world into reality? We can start by learning how to make democracy work -- really work -- in local communities. How can that begin to happen? How can we shift our society from "thin democracy" to "strong democracy"?[1] This is the key question we can all be starting to answer in our own way. Please give us your thoughts, including examples that you know are already working. We'll tell others what's working now.[3]

--Peter Montague

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[1] Benjamin R. Barber, *STRONG DEMOCRACY: PARTICIPATORY POLITICS FOR A NEW AGE* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984; paperback edition 1985). ISBN 0520056167. And be sure to see Benjamin R. Barber *A PLACE FOR US; HOW TO MAKE SOCIETY CIVIL AND DEMOCRACY STRONG* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998). ISBN 0809076578.

[2] "Directed sustainability" means sustainability that humans choose. As PCD points out, "If we fail to achieve sustainability, nature will impose it; but we would probably prefer the version we

choose."

[3] We have a new section on the Rachel web site called "What's Working Now" a catalog of good ideas that are actually working somewhere in the real world. Check it out at <http://www.rachel.org>.