

# INTRAGENERATIONAL EQUITY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND ETHICS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## Summary

Distributive justice preoccupations have existed, in all human societies, for millennia before there was any talk of “development” at all, and certainly before there was “sustainable development.” So the question is, in what distinctive ways distributional justice issues have become incorporated into discourses and analyses of sustainable development. This review chooses to focus on the issue of *ecological distribution*, a term which refers to the following sorts of questions: What is the distribution of the benefits of present patterns of natural resource and environmental exploitation? What mechanisms of capital flow, institutional power, technological change, etc., determine these patterns over time? Who carries the principal burdens of the unwanted side-effects of resource exploitation and waste disposal? Which social groups benefit most, and which suffer most from the impairment of life-support functions and from the loss of environmental amenities resulting from environmental degradation? How are these benefits and burdens distributed across societies, across space and time? How are these asymmetries valued (or devalued)? Analysis of ecological distribution also allows us to make an important link between inequalities between nations (across space, symbolized by the term North–South) and inequalities or injustices across time—epitomized by the concept of the “Ecological Debt.”

These equity questions are partly questions of power, legal rights, and income distribution, as reflected in existing markets and absences of markets. They are also

partly questions of technology and of the unplanned impacts of technological interventions in natural processes (exemplified by industrial accidents, oil spills, problems of chemical toxin and radioactive waste disposal, and mad cow disease). Finally, they are questions of ethics and of attitudes, notably the will or not of different people, and peoples, to live together and to create for each other an interdependent well-being.

## 1. Introduction

A rain shower may fall in a gutter, on a leaf of a thirsty plant, in dry soil or on an open air stove on which a poor woman is cooking her last bread. In every situation, the drop meets an unknown destiny. In the cases where it cools, washes, or quenches thirst, we welcome it. But when it extinguishes the fire in a poor woman's stove such that she has to sleep hungry, we wonder what kind of justice nature is seeking to provide?

Justice has been, from the 1970s, clearly linked with a variety of environmental themes, through such issues as land rights, environmental racism, ecofeminism, and Leftist critiques of capitalism. This is linked, but not limited to, concerns with income inequalities, lack of employment opportunities, poverty, and famine throughout the post-Second World War period to the 1970s.

The Charter of the United Nations, in 1945, affirmed in its Article 55, the global objective "to promote higher standards of living." Increase in the level of this indicator is the desired result—perhaps the very definition—of *economic development*, which, building on the nineteenth-century Western tradition, has its basis in a systematic exploitation of natural resources through rational utilization of science and technology in the form of industrial machinery. This concern for standard of living also works as a conceptual reference point for concerns for equality and for poverty—the obvious indicators (henceforth) will relate to levels of money income.

Equity would seem, in this simple perspective, to be a monetary thing. Yet the focus on money wage and salary levels as the essential index of one's social place, dates only from the industrial era and, even today, does not yet have universal currency. Theorists of well-being and poverty insist on a more structured frame for analyses. Max-Neef (1991), for example, has developed the argument that there are nine fundamental categories of human needs and that inadequacy in relation to any one of these categories constitutes a poverty. These are: *subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity and freedom*.

Many of Max-Neef's categories are relational in character (notably: affection, understanding, participation, identity). This suggests that questions of equity, justice and poverty cannot be analyzed merely as attributes of individuals (such as distribution of income); rather they must be understood as properties of whole societies or social groups.

Furthermore, even in a highly monetized economy, where (almost) everyone has some sort of a wage, the physical dimensions of well-being cannot be reduced to monetary dimensions alone. Most environmental resources and services, and disservices, are not in

the market and never will be. Therefore, in the contest of life support systems and sustainability objectives, we must place a great emphasis on *ecological distribution*—a term which, as we develop it (in section 2), refers to all the non-commodity environment as sources of human well-being. It refers thus to the social, spatial, and temporal asymmetries or inequalities in the non-marketed use by humans of environmental resources and services, such as wild and agricultural biodiversity, and in the burdens suffered, such as pollution. For example, an unequal distribution of land, and pressure of agricultural exports on limited land resources, may cause land degradation by subsistence peasants working on mountain slopes, accentuating inequalities of economic and ecological distribution. The inequalities in per capita exosomatic energy consumption would be an instance of social ecological distribution. The territorial asymmetries between SO<sub>2</sub> emissions and the burdens of acid rain are a case of spatial ecological distribution. The intergenerational inequalities between the enjoyment of nuclear energy (or emissions of CO<sub>2</sub>), and the burdens of radioactive waste (or global warming) are asymmetries of temporal ecological distribution.

Equity issues are often very local issues, but they also take on international proportions. Another facet of the universal ideology of development, is that all nations should progressively attain material affluence: the “under-developed” nations should therefore “catch up.” The 1960s Decade of Development was, in this regard, marked by a rather “naive” optimism, where government and non-government agencies alike worked for the “take off” of economic development leading—via liberal capitalist or socialist channels—to mass commodity consumption as the destiny for all of humanity. Unfortunately, by the 1970s it had already become apparent that the vaunted economic growth, fuelled by the transfusions of capital and know-how from industrialized countries to the Poor, was not having the employment-creation results that had been hoped of it. In addition, as the Club of Rome in 1972 sought to insist, a continuation of rapid growth fuelled by ever-increasing energy and natural resources use, threatened to bring some appalling environmental side-effects.

The perception that there may be binding ecological “limits to growth” at a planetary scale, brought a new urgency to the question, what is the role of international trade in the distribution of the benefits—and the burdens—of economic growth. In section 3 we discuss the debates about growth, trade and ecological distribution. We also make an important link between inequalities among nations (across space, as it were, symbolized by the term North–South) and inequalities or injustices across time. We give examples of two typical situations of ecological distribution conflicts. First, where exports of raw materials and other products are made from relatively poor countries at prices which do not include damages from local or global externalities; and second, where there is a disproportionate use by rich countries of environmental services without payment and even without recognition of property rights over them (for instance, the free use of marine ecosystems as waste dumps or of carbon dioxide absorption capacities).

Finally, in section 4, we discuss briefly some of the ethical and political arguments for distributional justice that emerge around environmental concerns. When we address the cultural and institutional meanings of sustainability, it becomes clear that the quality of life certainly has much to do also with the way people relate to each other, with the spirit in which human exchanges are conducted and wealth circulates.

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