

By Andrew L. Yarrow

# Sustainability and Intergenerational Solidarity

How do we leave a world to our children and grandchildren that is at least as good as what we now have?

**S**ustainability has marched to center stage in the American political and cultural lexicon as the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close. Advanced by environmentalists, proponents of new strategies of international development, and those concerned about a fiscal future burdened by debt, the notion of sustainability has morphed into a broader conception of how we, as stewards for our planet, should bequeath a holistically livable world to future generations. After centuries steeped in Enlightenment philosophies of progress and a deep American faith that we can make an “ever more perfect” society, sustainability arguably is a more

modest goal: How do we leave a world to our children and grandchildren that is at least as good as what we now have?

tic perspective can be found in a recent AARP poll revealing that a majority of older Americans believe that they will pass a damaged societal baton—a less good world—on to future generations. And at the other end of the life cycle, younger Americans express repeatedly that they do not expect life to be as good for them as it was for their parents.

But while today’s economic crisis may make these issues more salient, issues of sustainability and generational interdependence nonetheless transcend periods of relative scarcity or abundance. The current cultural resonance of “sustainability” also bespeaks a new and hopeful recognition of the ties that must bind all people, including future generations.

Thus, the concept is moving beyond environmental or economic discussions of maintaining natural or material

resources to become the basis for a new code of mutuality and solidarity. Climate change and the macro economy are of course extraordinarily important, yet interdependence across generations is a more embracing and human way of understanding and approaching “sustainability.” Reducing carbon emissions or debt, cultivating renewable resources or a healthy economy are vital endeavors, but they only indirectly get to the human meanings of why we should engage in them. Those meanings reside in what always

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modest goal: How do we leave a world to our children and grandchildren that is at least as good as what we now have?

Aside from being grounded in the realities of looming environmental, economic, and other dangers, including ones exacerbated by the current financial crisis, sustainability also reflects a mindset that is at once fearful yet also more spiritual in understanding the relationship and duties of humans to each other and to the earth across generations and time. The pessimis-

has been—but today must be more powerfully emphasized—the imperative for people of all ages to stand together. Intergenerational justice is not merely a matter of equitable resource allocation, but about reciprocity.

The arc of life is one of renewal, in which there is meaningful continuity through the ages only if those who are older maintain and pass on a decent world to their children and children's children. In practical terms, this means advocating for, and providing, public and private resources that are sufficient for children and young adults to thrive. But this continuity also entails reciprocal responsibilities on the part of the young, to recognize the needs of elders and not see them as competitors for resources or to blame for all environmental, economic, or other problems. Practically, this means supporting the resource needs for older Americans to have economic security and psychological fulfillment. While acknowledging economic constraints, we must aim to be generous in providing for the present and future needs of children, the elderly, and all people.

It behooves neither a 20-year-old nor a 75-year-old to look out for her own needs alone. Good education, physical and emotional health, and economic opportunities for children and the young must be important to older Americans if they truly care about sustaining their nation and world. Financial security and physical and psychological well-being for the elderly also must be important to young Americans if they want to sustain a healthy and harmonious society of all ages (and social classes and racial/

ethnic groups)—ages that they themselves inexorably will march toward as they proceed down life's path.


Perhaps in these economic times, it is even more important to recognize that sustainability is not a technical matter to be left to scientists, engineers, economists, and other experts. It is a human issue about grandparents and grandchildren, and people of all ages with or without relatives young or old, recognizing their mutual dependence, the imperative to cooperate with

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and understand one another. It is about living as part of the sweep of time—not living for today—and living for others—not just for oneself.

“Successful aging” should no more be confined to gerontologists' vocabulary than “thriving” should be restricted to that of pediatricians.

They are philosophical constructs that apply to all ages. Sustainability is about living the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, “a generation goes and comes, but the earth remains forever;” of Arthur Lovejoy's “great chain of being” or even Disney's “circle of life.” The world and humanity can only be “sustainable” if we embrace generativity, the idea that human continuity requires people throughout the life cycle and throughout time to support, guide, and care for one another. 

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*Andrew L. Yarrow is vice president and Washington director of Public Agenda and an adjunct history professor at American University, Washington, D.C.*