



## ENVIRONMENTAL & SOCIAL JUSTICE

“The most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's dispossessed. Of these poor and disenfranchised, the majority live a marginal existence in equatorial climates. Global warming, not of their making but originating with the wealthy few, will affect their fragile ecologies most. Their situation will be desperate and manifestly unjust.

It cannot be expected, therefore, that in all cases they will be content to await the beneficence of the rich. If then we permit the devastating power of modern weaponry to spread throughout this combustible human landscape, we invite a conflagration that can engulf both rich and poor. The only hope for the future lies in co-operative international action, legitimized by democracy.

It is time to turn our backs on the universal search for security, in which we seek shelter behind walls. Instead, we must persist in the quest for united action to counter both global warming and a weaponized world.... To survive in the world we have transformed, we must learn to think in a new way. As never before, the future of each depends on the good of all.” (*Statement by one hundred Nobel laureates on the hundredth anniversary of the Nobel Prize, 2001.*)

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

The notion of *sustainable development* has been much discussed and often abused since it was coined by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. But it is still straightforward enough to have real meaning: "development that meets the needs of the future without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>29</sup> Is Canada's energy strategy environmentally sustainable? Burning coal and gas to produce electricity produces climate-disrupting carbon dioxide. There is no safe method for the disposal of nuclear waste, cancer-causing garbage that will still be deadly in a hundred thousand years.

People want to participate in the future of their society. Access to energy and methods of energy production need to be discussed as widely and as frankly as possible. Does everyone have a say? The very size and shape of megaprojects like nuclear power stations and the Alberta oil sands make them difficult to grasp. They are the products of the collaboration of physicists, geologists, chemists, and engineers. The financial press publishes notices of bond issues listing international banks that get together to lend enormous sums of money for energy-related projects. These complex transactions and all the technical decisions make it very difficult for the public to get involved in the debate.

The problem is that these decisions are made within very narrow financial and scientific perspectives. The human, social, and environmental costs that emerge in the long term are downplayed or ignored.

Participation is something that people have to work to achieve. One approach is to win autonomy from outside forces like provincial utilities and transnational oil companies through conservation and the use of renewable resources. People add insulation and redesign their homes to save energy, adding special lighting and efficient windows that cut heat loss. Approaches that emphasize conservation and renewable energy tend to be small-scale and decentralized. It is far easier for people to exercise control over a comprehensive district heating plan, local conservation program, or a small hydroelectric generator than it is to have input into a nuclear power station or a

off-shore oil rig. Why does government give its massive support to the huge projects and not to local initiatives?



Non-participation has become "normal" and acceptable; citizens are usually excluded from decisions that have the biggest effects on the environment. Should they have the opportunity to consider the full range of risks and benefits of different options? The idea is not to shirk all risks or condemn all development, but to prevent costly decisions from being imposed without people having a say. Participation is the key to ensuring environmental policies that are more just and sustainable. Participation is also at the heart of the democratic ideal. It is an end, or a value, in itself.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the source of the water you drink? Is it tested for contaminants? If it is, are the tests aimed at finding bacteria alone, or do they cover a broader range of potentially hazardous substances? Who does the testing? To whom do they report? Is it easy for ordinary citizens to find out the answers to these questions and to participate in confronting these and other environmental challenges?
2. How clean is the air where you live? To what extent do local industries and electrical utilities emit dangerous pollutants? What about automobiles? How do you react if you can see the air on hot, smoggy summer days? Do people see it as part of the weather, something that no one can do anything about? Or do you respond by trying to change your individual lifestyle by walking, cycling, or taking public transportation instead of driving? And are you inclined to get involved in public issues, such as determining how cities are designed and the extent to which industry emissions are regulated?
3. China, with over a billion people, has a strict, one-child-per family policy for the sake of the country's future. Most Canadians would approve of this effort to control the human impact on the Earth. Resources are limited. But Canadian physicist Ursula Franklin has asked an important question: why have Canadians, and people in other rich countries, not addressed the possibility of a one-car-per-family policy for the sake of the country's and the world's- future?
4. Do you take cars for granted, as a natural way of getting around? Do you know many people who see their vehicles as status symbols as well as tools? What is the effect of advertising on how we view the relationship between the way we live and the issue of environmental degradation? How would you or your family and friends react if the government passed a law restricting car ownership?
5. Highly trained experts employed by government and industry are used to working with reports, statistics, flow charts, and obscure technical terminology. Their experience can easily lead them to doubt the ability of most citizens to assimilate and understand complex data. But without the facts about energy use and pollution, how can ordinary people make informed judgments about issues like dioxins in the aquifers and particulate matter in the air? What responsibility to the public do experts have? Are there alternative sources of expertise upon which citizens can rely?