



Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context

A Sustainable Climate?

Andrew Blowers

We've seen how policy makers and politicians try to deal with the various constraints they face. In the final part of the programme I want to turn to some of the wider, ethical issues that seem to me to emerge from the discussion so far. In particular let's look at the broad concept of sustainable development. What does it mean in terms of both sustainability and development? In particular, what does sustainable development imply for environment and society both now and in the future? Simon Retallack.

Simon Retallack

Different people have different interpretations of what sustainable development means. For some people there is no such thing as sustainable development. They see it as an oxymoron, it's just incompatible. For them, development means industrialisation based on the fossil fuel economy. It's the Western model of development and by definition, if you like; we know that it's not sustainable in that form. So if you take that view, it's not possible. But increasingly, it's a phrase that's used to denote, above all probably, environmental sustainability in whatever economic practices and processes that are undertaken at a national level. And that should be possible. Not doing it actually is the thing that's not likely to be sustainable or possible in the long run. To base economic activity and prosperity on any economic model that trashes the foundations, if you like, of life obviously is not gonna be one that lasts very long.

Andrew Watkinson

There is the question that was opened up by Nick Stern in the Stern Review, this question of the discount rate in the way that we cost what we do. He wanted us to consider what happened to future generations - this issue of intergenerational equity, the fact that okay, what extent do we discount the future? Many economic models would indicate we should discount it fairly heavily. Nick Stern's saying no, we shouldn't, we should have a fairly low discount rate. We should take account of the actions that we take now and what impact they're going to have on future generations. Although for most of us, it's difficult to go beyond what happens to our children or our grandchildren.

Andrew Blowers

How interesting and I think maybe I could just put in a final thought at this point: it's really how far can we or should we care about the future? And it seems to me it's not simply a problem of discounting behind it are some quite profound ethical issues about relationships between us, the planet and the future.

Andrew Watkinson

I think that's right and I think one of the things I've certainly noticed in my career is that we are now considering ethical issues in science much more profoundly than I think we did in the past.

Andrew Blowers

Brian, one of the spurs to action, but at the same time one of the constraints upon action is what you might call intra-generational equity. You know, the problem that we've got between the developed world and the developing world in all its manifestations, in terms of the climate change issue. And that seems to me to act, as it were, against the need for inter-generational equity. We're trying to deal here with a problem of somehow making things more equal or trying to cope with that in the present and at the same time climate change is essentially an issue about inter-generational equity. I mean there is, it seems to me, an absolute conflict here and that's really where there's both the science and the politics inhabit that problem.

Brian Wynne

Yeah. I mean for a start, you could say that well, we're okay at the moment with the existing state of climate of change, but that doesn't necessarily apply to everybody in the world, especially those in more vulnerable parts of the world, like the Ganges Delta and various other places where they're already suffering and various others could be said to be already suffering from climate change. So I see the intra-generational issues and the inter-generational issues in quite such starkly opposite ways as I think your question was implying they are. One could pose it as a human ethical issue. If we were to actually define and enact policies here and now, which generated real equity, real justice, real fairness everywhere on the face of the planet, maybe that would actually lead to a more sustainable climate and indeed other environmental and social conditions, maybe not. We don't really know. But if it did actually lead to an unsustainable world where we might actually disappear in three generations or something, but it would be three generations of justice, would that be a better or a worse effect than having human kind continuing in a completely undemocratic, authoritarian, instrumentalised and unjust way on the face of the planet forever? Well, maybe the fourth generation hence would say, "We'd rather be around," but I think it's worth posing it in that sort of way. I already feel sufficiently troubled by the state of the present world without worrying too much about what it's gonna be like for the nth generation in the future. Yes, of course we need to think about those generations, but whether we can do that by only thinking instrumentally about what it takes to keep the planet's climate going, I'm not convinced about that.

Andrew Blowers

Well that's a very tough call and I'd like to ask you, where do you stand in this issue of where we're going basically?

Brian Wynne

Yeah. Well hope springs eternal. But I've got to say it doesn't look good when you look at the forms of response to what we know about climate at the present time. I see too many other issues about things like over consumption for example, about lack of commitment to collective forms of human life, whether it's neighbourhoods, whether it's families or one's own personal social networks. Whatever else it might be, whether it's nation states. I see too many other forms of social and political and indeed technological and scientific practice that are problematic, that I feel like if we were to get to grips with some of those we might well find that actually the climate problem would not loom so large because we were doing other things, indirectly, which had actually inadvertently created a contribution to the solution.

Andrew Blowers

And this takes us back to the question of what we can and should do about the future of the planet, to what precisely we mean by sustainable development. At the beginning of the programme I drew a broad distinction between science as producing knowledge and policy making as solving problems. It's obvious from the discussion we've had that the roles are not sharply distinguished but closely interrelated - even, perhaps, integrated - in the pursuit of solutions. Scientists and policy makers together have to confront some of the most difficult and pressing ethical questions about what kind of environment and society we are creating and what our future legacy will be. And, in turn, this makes us consider how much we should take the future into account and how far into the future our concern should extend. These are profound ethical questions and we all share in the responsibility for seeking the answers.