

**INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE OF THE 67<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON HARMONY WITH NATURE TO COMMEMORATE INTERNATIONAL MOTHER EARTH DAY**

**UNHQ, New York, 22 April 2013, Conference Room 3 (NLB) 10 am to 1 pm**

**ONE WORLD ONE WEALTH:  
ECONOMICS, JUSTICE AND RIGHTS FOR NATURE**

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Thank you for the invitation to speak .....

I will be speaking about something that is close to my heart and is of the profoundest importance to humanity at the present time. I will be speaking about the essence of Man and the intimate relations between humanity and the Earth.

We are here, as the concept note bids us, to celebrate Mother Earth Day with discussions on economic approaches to harmony with nature in the context of sustainable development, and to further a more ethical basis for the relationship between humanity and the Earth.

In the School of Economic Science of which I have the honour to be Principal, we approach such discussions if at all possible by reference to major wisdom traditions. What we find is that in their different ways, apparently different philosophies and religions have common themes and understandings that each expresses in its own way. One of these themes is the idea of Nature and of natural laws that are inherent in both human nature and Mother Nature. Another is a sense of unity and interconnectedness

between the human and the natural worlds; a sense that there are right and lawful ways to relate to Nature which if well understood and followed offer a natural way of living in harmony with Nature.

In the School we have worked with these ideas for a long time. We have also worked with the ideas of justice and equity, and the result has been to develop a view of economics that we call economics with justice. We adopt the view that justice is the ethical basis of economics and that the real measure of economic understanding is whether the outcomes of the policies and practices that flow from that understanding produce justice for all participants. Against that test, contemporary understanding and practice of economics leaves a great deal to be desired.

How do we know? We know because wherever we look we can see injustices, many of them produced by economic forces under human control. A brief survey of the global economy shows great accumulations of wealth alongside great poverty; we see consumption patterns based on exploitation of some for the benefit of others; we see our natural environment systematically undermined and destroyed to maintain profit margins; we see people dispossessed of their essential means of livelihood, their cultures swept aside and their children forced by necessity to leave their communities and engage, often at huge disadvantage, in the life of modern industrial production; we see the bounty of Nature, the reproductive power of seeds, the powers and qualities of plants, as well as land and the environment, reduced to private ownership in the pursuit of private gain.

All these are symptoms of injustice and what we suggest is that injustice of this kind is a sign of economic laws either poorly understood or unjustly applied.

So what has this to do with Mother Earth? Most economics textbooks refer to the three main factors of production: land, labour and capital. Many of them then go on to discuss and describe economics as though land is no longer relevant, or at best as though it can be

subsumed into capital and treated as though it were the same thing. But this is not so. Material wealth – the things we use to feed, clothe and shelter ourselves and to satisfy our material desires – and to create real or physical capital – has only one common source: it is all produced by human effort applied to land. Every single atom of material used for human production and consumption has its origins in the Earth. This was well known in ancient times, in the way that it still is today among many indigenous peoples.

We hear, for example, from the Indian epic, the Mahabharata: “Earth, if its resources are properly developed according to its qualities and prowess, is like an ever-yielding cow, from which the three-fold fruits of virtue, profit and pleasure may be milked. If Earth be well looked after, it becomes the father, mother, children, firmament and heaven of all creatures”.

Notice how, even from ancient times, the human interaction with Earth is described in terms of the most intimate of human relationships.

We hear the same from ancient Greece, from Homer himself:

“Gaia, mother of all, the strong foundation, the oldest one,

I shall sing to Earth.

She feeds everyone in the world.

Whoever you are,

Whether you walk upon her sacred ground

Or move through the paths of the sea,

You who fly, it is She

Who nourishes you from Her treasure store.

I have yet to come across land described in these terms in an economics textbook – and the omission of this understanding of land from economics has devastating consequences.

Land to many economists is a more or less abstract concept, often meaning only

agricultural land as though somehow our cities, roads, airports, factories, homes, schools and conference centres exist in their own right as capital without any need for the land on which they invariably stand. Or otherwise, it simply becomes another commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand like every other commodity and able to be bought and sold like so many sacks of wheat.

But land is not subject to laws of supply and demand like every other commodity. The basic law is said to be that if demand increases, supply will also increase until equilibrium is reached. But even economists are coming to realise that this is not so with land. The supply of land cannot increase just because the human population, and therefore demand, increases. The only thing that can increase is the price of land because the supply is fixed – and that can only be sustained while the demand remains effective as the economic history of the last six years has demonstrated.

The result of this has been amply shown by Fred Pearce in his recent book: *The Landgrabbers*. Wherever we look in the world: the Far East, Indonesia, India, Australia, Africa, South America, what economists call land is being privatised in just the way that it was centuries ago in Europe and North America – and it is being privatised in order to participate in the global economy with, as always, little or no regard for the local economies of the real living breathing loving people being displaced by the new landlords. The consequence of this is to allow private interests to deal with land and the environment as though they owe no obligations to the land itself, to Nature or to anybody else.

This calls for much closer examination than it generally receives because land is not merely an abstract commodity. It is in fact the whole natural environment, the supporter of all life of all creatures and the source of all material wealth for human beings. Whoever owns the land therefore, owns the means of subsistence of everyone and everything dependent on it. The owners of land are the owners of the environment and

the masters of the economy. And yet little or nothing is done by governments and legal systems to ensure that they exercise this privilege with proper consideration for a much wider community.

Why should this matter? It matters because we are human beings and human beings are extraordinary creatures. We are extraordinary because we have immense creativity. We have the insight and power to enter into the intelligence of Nature, understand natural laws and even adapt Nature herself to our own ends, at least for a time. And we may do so as part of Nature, allowing for a mutually enhancing relationship like an intelligent mind in a healthy and vigorous body.

But we also have freedom of choice, freedom to make mistakes, and freedom to regulate ourselves. How to exercise that freedom is the critical question. Do we each exercise it for our own ends, or do we exercise it in the interests of a common good embracing all our fellow beings, seeing them as really no different from ourselves? Harmony with Nature seems to demand that we do so for the common good.

It matters also because, when land and Nature are recognised as the source of all material wealth and of much human wellbeing, the roots of the widely observed disparities between rich and poor become clear. They lie in the distribution of land ownership and the absence of obligations attached to exclusive occupation of land.

So what are the implications of this? Surely the first is that no-one can truly own land as a personal possession with no obligations to anyone or anything else. As intelligent and rational beings we have a responsibility to exercise our capacities with care for everything and everyone that may be affected by our actions. In English law, as in many jurisdictions, this is called the duty of care. Is it not time that we recognised that part of being human is to care for the land we occupy and pass it on in as good or better condition than we found it?

This is all very well in theory. Perhaps a universal attitude of care could be sufficient – but all human experience suggests that it is unlikely to be achieved in practice. Human nature may conceivably achieve perfection, but few human beings are born perfect or take the trouble to become perfect. We all have our faults and flaws. Lawyers and legal systems are used to this and have means of dealing with it. It is perfectly possible to establish and enforce a duty of care whether it is felt by individuals or not.

For example, nowadays we recognise the duty of governments to act ethically and with care for the governed. We also recognise that governments sometimes fail to do so. But by recognising individual human rights and providing for their enforcement through national and international courts it has been possible to restrain governments within an effective rule of law. We do this because the only way to curb unethical or inappropriate use of power is to place it under law and enforce the laws.

In relation to Earth, humans are powerful and capable of abusing their power. We may not be able to induce every human being to love the Earth, let alone every government or corporation, but we could restrain the worst excesses by recognising rights for Nature and enforcing them through laws. Hence the growing chorus of calls from around the world for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature and the adoption of such codes in several jurisdictions. All of this tends towards recognising a simple duty of care for the Earth that may apply to individuals, corporations and governments alike.

One purpose of this dialogue is to develop some proposals. The first thing economics with justice would propose is to introduce the test of justice into economics by measuring economic progress not only in terms of gross domestic product and economic growth, but more importantly in terms of the eradication of injustice. The real aim of economics is to establish justice and equity for the welfare of humanity and of the human relationship with Mother Earth and to make it possible for all human beings to flourish without harm to anything else. This is what is meant by economics with justice.

A second proposal is to recognise the duty of care for Nature and for each other as central to ethical economics and ethical ownership of land and environment. This can be given practical effect through recognising and enforcing rights for Nature just as we recognise and enforce human rights. In doing so the aim can be to build sustainable and flourishing economies offering progress with prosperity to all peoples without exploitation or misuse of Nature herself.

A third proposal is to recognise that all ownership of land, private or public, is at best only temporary possession and is a privilege which can only be sustained if attendant duties are observed and if necessary enforced. These include duties to keep land in good condition, and look after it well; to leave land in as good or better condition than we find it; and also to recompense surrounding communities for the benefit that private occupation of land confers on some and for that reason removes from others.

This could be accomplished, at least in part, by collecting an annual levy, based on the annual value a community puts on any particular piece of land and its usefulness. That value is readily expressed in the market value of land.

I venture to suggest that following these proposals through and adapting our understanding of economics accordingly could open the way to a more harmonious and lawful human relationship with Mother Earth and to a much more natural way of living for all peoples, everywhere.

Thank you very much.

*Fred Pearce: The Landgrabbers, Transworld Publishers 2012*