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# The Local-Global Connection: Forging Inter-scale Sustainability Action

Matthew Polsky

Consultant | EarthPeople

Senior Fellow | Institute for Sustainable Enterprise, Fairleigh Dickinson University

Email: [innovator3@hotmail.com](mailto:innovator3@hotmail.com)

Even successful local sustainability initiatives have forgotten some core principles of both environmentalism and sustainability. The famous statement: “Think Globally; Act Locally” has inspired many positive locally-oriented actions, but it has also clouded the “interdependence” theme of the original Earth Day. This paper explores how citizen acting at the local level can recognize and magnify their global impact by examining precedents in overcoming the “island” mindset of most locally-focused initiatives. The intent is to uncover and release some latent, untapped citizen energy aimed at making a difference globally while providing a very powerful reminder that we really are all connected.

## The Local-Global Connection: Forging Inter-scale Sustainability Action

As my fellow “work-sharers” and I fulfill our weekly 3-hour stints at a community-supported farm, someone brings up the topic of sustainability. (This tends to happen during this type of social gardening.) While digging up garlic, I trialed: “Sustainability is the evolution of environmentalism.” Although this explanation seemed to satisfy my garlic partner, as I further considered the distinction between sustainability and environmentalism, I recognized both a key difference and a synergy between the movements.

A key distinction is that environmentalism came of age years before society conceived that business could be anything but the enemy to a clean planet. Sustainable business, on the other hand, is now a recognized field and, at its best, aims for exactly that. Sustainability has the potential to breathe new life into some core tenets of environmentalism, which are critical even though they seem to have been forgotten. There are no serious barriers to realizing that potential, other than that changing of a mindset - or actually bringing it back to where it once was.

It is very possible to make the connection between early environmentalism and sustainability. A benefit to doing so would be the possibility of redirecting some of the citizen energy applied at the local level (perhaps still latent and untapped) and aiming it globally.

The famous statement in the environmental field, “Think Globally; Act Locally” has inspired many positive actions, and is consistent with the “Subsidiarity Principle.” This public policy concept states the logical-sounding idea that policy actions should be restricted to that scale where the effect occurs. By this measure, local actions would address problems classified as local, and global actions would be taken by global players to deal with worldwide problems. However, both of these viewpoints can be limiting in their scope. They can clash with the core “interdependence” theme of the original Earth Day, spurred as it was by that famous first picture of the Earth from space.<sup>1</sup> The “We Are All Connected” banner on posters back then has become no less true.

(There is also an argument **for the opposite** of the guidance above, which is “Think Local; Act Global.” This is the subtitle of an article about a number of local resource conflicts in Canada, and how local opponents of development proposals, frustrated in making their cases at home, took their case to the international scale.<sup>2</sup> They targeted the media, legislatures, the U.N., NGOs, visiting tourists, and even the Pope to raise support in order to pressure decision-makers back home. Perhaps the consumer boycott and import ban of furs from baby seals by the European Common Market was the most famous example of this type of local-global connection.)

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<sup>1</sup> Home Sweet Home: In Praise of ‘Blue Marble.’ Life. December 1972.  
<http://life.time.com/history/blue-marble-the-iconic-apollo-17-photo-of-earth-from-space/#ixzz2e2IG8SSj>.

<sup>2</sup> Barker, Mary L. & Dietrich Soye. Think Locally Act Globally? The Transnationalization of Canadian Resource-Use Conflicts. Environment. V 36, N 5. June 1994.

Further, there is a conflict with another core tenet, this time from The Brundtland Commission Report (also known as Our Common Future<sup>3</sup>), which first put sustainability<sup>4</sup> on the map. This report proposed a new bargain between the developed countries and the developing ones and promised that we would help them develop economic alternatives so that they don't repeat the same mistakes we did. This proposal was accepted at the first Earth Summit in Rio in 1992.

The global theme is noticeably absent from the numerous sustainability forums at the local and state levels, which appear to have almost an "island" mindset. Three of the most prominent programs, Sustainable Seattle, New York City's PlaNYC, and Sustainable Jersey show no explicit acknowledgement of the global scale, although certainly the first one, through its early prominence, has influenced thinking in municipalities around the world.<sup>5</sup> While "local" frequently resonates with many, we should all be aware of our full range of choices.

Even successful local initiatives place all of their emphasis at the local scale. There's almost an assumption made, especially by the Transition Movement (which goes the furthest with its "sub-municipality" orientation), that these localities and states are islands that affect no one beyond their own borders and likewise are not affected by outside forces, either. The "local" context can limit thinking regarding what should concern citizens and what they can do about it.

For example, consider a village in Indonesia or Brazil where residents are forced to make global-affecting decisions such as whether to clear-cut their rainforest because, economically, they perceive no other opportunities for prosperity. Others have carried this argument further to include poverty or severe water shortages in developing countries leading to such desperate conditions that these areas become susceptible as breeding grounds for terrorism. Or, in the age of globalization and relatively easy international travel, what about the facilitation of the spread of viruses to other parts of the globe? All of this can affect anyone's "island" and make efforts to improve sustainability in other parts of the planet actually quite relevant.

But is it actually possible for a citizen acting at the local level or even individually to aim globally? There are enough exceptions now that it should be possible to overcome this pure locally-focused mindset. The most prominent one, ironically, comes from outside the sustainability world. Locally-operated Rotary Clubs, through leadership, funding, and volunteer time overseas, receive much of the credit for major progress towards nearly wiping out polio worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development. Our Common Future. 1987. Oxford University Press. [http://books.google.com/books/about/El\\_desarrollo\\_sostenible\\_una\\_gu%C3%ADa\\_sobre.html?id=WQkPAQAAMAAJ](http://books.google.com/books/about/El_desarrollo_sostenible_una_gu%C3%ADa_sobre.html?id=WQkPAQAAMAAJ).

<sup>4</sup> Shinn, Robert C, Jr. & Matt Polsky. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Non-Traditional Role in Promoting Sustainable Development Internationally. Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations. V III, N2. Summer/Fall 2002. [http://s2concepts.com/article\\_main\\_pg.htm](http://s2concepts.com/article_main_pg.htm).

<sup>5</sup> History. Sustainable Seattle. Accessed September 5, 2013. <http://www.sustainableseattle.org/whoweare/history>.

<sup>6</sup> End Polio. Rotary International. 2013. <http://www.rotary.org/en/end-polio>.

Here are others, both from within and outside the explicit sustainability world:

- Sister city relationships between towns in a developed and developing country stem from the Eisenhower Administration,<sup>7</sup> and can cover more than economic matters. While not a developing country, Japan was in serious trouble after the nuclear incident at Fukushima. U.S. towns with such relationships in Japan rushed to help. For example, Galveston sent blankets to its "sister," Niigata; Hot Springs, Arkansas did a fundraiser for Hanamaki. The quotes below are not what you see every day when towns think about foreign affairs:

“There is a very visceral connection between our two cities (Riverside, California and Sendai), and there has been for a long time.” (Lalit Acharya, Riverside Mayor’s Office)

“Many Japanese students have come to do home stays here, and once you’ve taken a child into your home they are very much a part of your family. If it weren’t for our sister city program, I’m not sure people here would care as much and as deeply about what happened in Japan.” (Mary Neilson, Hot Springs)

- Similarly, USAID and the International City/County Management Association have a program called CityLinks,<sup>8</sup> which operates between municipal government officials and staff. Projects tend to include technical assistance and donations, involving infrastructure management, including solid waste management and recycling, but can include economic development, education, and the arts. Some of the relationships continued beyond the USAID-funded period.

Mike Bestor, Golden’s city manager, said of his experience: “It was gratifying to see the progress made in Veliko Turnovo (Bulgaria) and to know that we had a small part in making it happen. The local leadership there is fantastic and deserves the credit. We are very proud that Golden’s infrastructure system was recognized and supported by USAID for replication across Bulgaria. All of us who participated in this program remain eager to return and see our good friends.”

- Fair trade<sup>9</sup> towns agree to purchase products at above market rates from towns in developing countries to facilitate improvements to the latter’s living conditions (and reduce the necessity for environmentally destructive economic activities).

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<sup>7</sup> Wollan, Malia. Help From the U.S. for Afflicted Sister Cities in Japan. The New York Times. March 19, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/us/20sister.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/us/20sister.html?_r=0).

<sup>8</sup> Leahy, Nancy. ICMA Programs Foster Enduring International Partnerships. ICMA International. March 31, 2010. [http://icma.org/en/international/Article/5277/ICMA\\_Programs\\_Foster\\_Enduring\\_International\\_Partnerships](http://icma.org/en/international/Article/5277/ICMA_Programs_Foster_Enduring_International_Partnerships).

<sup>9</sup> About. Fair Trade Towns USA. 2010. <http://fairtradetownsusa.org/about/>.

- Municipal purchasing decisions can reflect concerns about activities that cause serious global impacts like rainforest deforestation. For example, spurred by an environmental group, Rainforest Relief, New York City announced **at the U.N.** that it would reduce its use of imported tropical wood<sup>10</sup> by 20%, while working to eliminate this usage for boardwalks, park benches, and piers.
- Even if only symbolically through attention-getting political statements, cities can show support for social causes in developing countries. An example were municipal resolutions during the anti-Apartheid battles of a generation ago which perhaps provided encouragement to those more directly involved in South Africa.

In New Jersey, the organization leading local sustainability efforts, Sustainable Jersey,<sup>11</sup> visited Taiwan to discuss sustainability. In the near-term, this led to a return visit from Taiwan's Environmental Protection Minister, Shu-Hung Shen, and a relationship between Lawrenceville's Ben Franklin Elementary School and JianAn Elementary School. Facilitated by Eco-Schools International, students communicate remotely about environmental topics like water conservation and recycling. Congressman Rush Holt said: "It's the best way, probably the only way we'll actually achieve sustainability."<sup>12</sup>

Subsequent results were the establishment by Taiwan of a Low Carbon and Sustainable Homeland Program, "modeled after Sustainable Jersey." Ethan Goffman speculates one factor that led to Taiwan doing this was "the example of a powerful, high-status mentor"—Sustainable Jersey.

In an interesting dynamic, Taiwan went further than New Jersey by making theirs a national program. Further, showing learning can go in the other direction, too, the Lawrence school is replicating an educational model developed by the Taiwanese school. The two schools have also become "sister schools."

An additional quote from Goffman shows, in a way, the obvious, but is not the way things are typically seen or practiced:

"Sustainability occurs at the community level and the international level all at once. Countries and individuals share what works."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mayor Announced Plan to Reduce the Use of Tropical Hardwoods. February 11, 2008. [http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor\\_press\\_release&catID=1194&doc\\_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2008a%2Fpr045-08.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1](http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2008a%2Fpr045-08.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1).

<sup>11</sup> Sustainable Jersey. 2012. <http://www.sustainablejersey.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> Costa, Samantha. Lawrence Students Join Counterparts in Taiwan for Sustainability Efforts. The Times, August 10, 2011. [http://www.nj.com/mercercer/index.ssf/2011/08/lawrence\\_students\\_join\\_counter.html](http://www.nj.com/mercercer/index.ssf/2011/08/lawrence_students_join_counter.html).

<sup>13</sup> Goffman, Ethan. Often Overlooked, Taiwan and New Jersey Lead the Race to Sustainability. July 23, 2013. <http://sppjournal.blogspot.com/2013/07/often-overlooked-taiwan-and-new-jersey.html>

- Citizens can already act directly at the global level through U.N.-centric organizations like CITNET<sup>14</sup> or the United Nations Association,<sup>15</sup> which are used to having individual members.
- Further, globally-oriented organizations that do not ordinarily recruit citizen volunteers might accept them if asked. Examples include The Macheke Sustainability Project,<sup>16</sup> which catalyzes “social business initiatives to... eradicate poverty” in a village in Zimbabwe.
- Other ideas include: hosting exchange students, particularly but not just during emergency situations; acting as responsible eco-tourists when traveling in developing countries; volunteering for a project in the developing world, such as with Cross-Cultural Solutions;<sup>17</sup> planting milkweed in backyard gardens<sup>18</sup> to reestablish the food supply for the declining numbers of monarch butterflies as they migrate between Mexico and Canada; donating a used bicycle to a developing country, such as through an organization like Bikes for the World;<sup>19</sup> and lending money to a Kiva-connected business<sup>20</sup> in a developing country.

An article I co-wrote in 2002, “The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s (NJDEP’s) Non-Traditional Role in Promoting Sustainable Development Internationally,” found that the state agency actually was implementing several global-scale activities without anyone generally realizing it. For instance, to protect the seasonal breeding grounds of threatened red knots, the state legislature restricted harvesting of their food supply, horseshoe crabs, in their southwest Jersey habitat. This helped New Jersey fulfill its share of the global responsibility to protect these birds’ multi-continental migratory route from Chile, ultimately to the Arctic, and back.

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<sup>14</sup> Integrative Strategies Forum. Citizens Network for Sustainable Development. 2011. <http://www.citnet.org/>

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Foundation. United Nations Association of the United States of America. 2013. <http://www.unausa.org/>

<sup>16</sup> Macheke Sustainability: Seeking Sustainable Solutions for an Invisible Village. Accessed September 5, 2013. <http://machekeproject.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Cross-Cultural Solutions. 2013. <http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org/>

<sup>18</sup> Setziol, Ilsa. How to Plant Milkweed for Monarch Butterflies. Los Angeles Times. January 4, 2011. [http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/home\\_blog/2011/01/milkweed-for-butterflies.html](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/home_blog/2011/01/milkweed-for-butterflies.html)

<sup>19</sup> Bikes for the World. 2013. <http://www.bikesfortheworld.org/>

<sup>20</sup> Kiva. Accessed September 5, 2013. <http://www.kiva.org/start>

Another was an “exchange of policy ideas” between the state and a foreign government, The Netherlands, which informed—and **actually emboldened**-state-wide “Sustainability goals.”<sup>21</sup> This initiative was lost with a change of government administrations at both ends, but perhaps there will be echoes of it when Sustainable Jersey hosts a “Sustainability Summit” in mid-September to renew discussion of goals for the state.<sup>22</sup>

This article also discussed that the above-mentioned “Subsidiarity Principle” is not necessarily always appropriate, and is limiting to creativity.

Once this unnecessary barrier is lifted, sometimes we see the strange (but potentially nice) dynamic of a city not only succeeding in helping cities in developing countries with measures that had not always worked at home due to various pressures, but possibly facilitating the conditions for success later at the home base.

New York City Mayor Bloomberg (both as Mayor and through his foundation--but apparently separate from PlaNYC) has helped spread various traffic safety measures to developing countries (“Bloomberg’s Traffic Ideas: First the World, Then, Maybe the City”). These include donating bike helmets to children in Hanoi, “lobbying successfully to drive down the legal blood alcohol limit in Guadalajara,” and “arming police in Cambodia with Breathalyzers...”

Matt Flegenheimer speculates one motive might be Bloomberg’s “thirst for wide-scale influence.” As Bloomberg puts it: “Our record of improving safety in New York encouraged me to try to replicate this same success around the world. Road safety has not typically been a top priority, yet the number of lives that could potentially be saved is incredible.” The Bloomberg Foundation believes these “efforts will save at least 13,000 lives over a five-year period.”

Others agree on the impact. Flegenheimer writes: “...traffic and public health experts say Mr. Bloomberg has emerged as perhaps the world’s leading transportation force, acting as a catalyst abroad ...” Dr. Etienne Krug, of the World Health Organization, says: “We have never seen anything like this. This is by far the largest international road safety project ever.”<sup>23</sup>

Astonishingly, in what would typically lead to cynicism and taxpayer complaints of a “boondoggle” about trips by New York City’s innovative Transportation Commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, to places like Bogota, did anything but. They not only supported the idea of her travel, but they made financial contributions to it. Dick Dadey, of Citizens Action, a government watchdog group, said: “There is a clear public benefit to these travels.” Showing, again, that

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<sup>21</sup> Shinn, Robert C, Jr. & Matt Polsky. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s Non-Traditional Role in Promoting Sustainable Development Internationally. Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations. V III N2. Summer/Fall 2002. [http://s2concepts.com/article\\_main\\_pg.htm](http://s2concepts.com/article_main_pg.htm)

<sup>22</sup> Sustainable Jersey. Sustainable Summit. Accessed September 5, 2013. <http://www.sustainablejersey.com/events-trainings/sustainability-summit/>

<sup>23</sup> Flegenheimer, Matt. Bloomberg’s Traffic Ideas: First the World, Then, Maybe, the City. The New York Times. July 13, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/nyregion/bloombergs-traffic-ideas-first-the-world-then-maybe-the-city.html?pagewanted=all>

learning can go in both directions, Stu Loseser, a spokesman for Mayor Bloomberg, said the “mayor expected his staff members ‘to stay on top of what is the most innovative and interesting work being done’ in their fields. Sometimes it means getting out and seeing how other places are attacking challenges we share.”<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusions

We could use many more of these types of activities that could be called “Glocal.”<sup>25</sup> Hopefully, with more awareness that it is possible and helpful, we’ll see more new energy at the interface between the global and local scales. Some core principles will be renewed along the way, as, whether we realize it front and center, **we really are all connected. We could use that reminder.**

Paradoxically, successful Glocal efforts will spring back and indirectly help the citizens’ towns as well (although the impacts will not always be clear or measurable). Local sustainability initiatives ought to recognize a global consciousness, encourage this way of contributing, and absorb it into their own goals. They might begin by asking their local Rotary Club how they did it, and see if there are ways to work together.

In New Jersey, for example, Sustainable Jersey, which utilizes a point system to certify municipalities for undertaking various levels of sustainability actions, could put out a call for a work group of citizens to adapt some of the above ideas as an additional option, called “Global” (or Glocal) activities. Towns seeking either certification for the first time, or higher levels of it, could choose a few of these activities to implement. It would be helpful if they announce this attention at their upcoming “Sustainability Summit.”

It would also be helpful if those already working on sustainability at global institutions could, from their end, encourage more local participation.

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<sup>24</sup> Barbaro, Michael. Advocacy Groups Helped Pay for Official’s Trips. The New York Times. July 7, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/nyregion/07travel.html>

<sup>25</sup> Wikipedia. Glocal Forum. March 2, 2013. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glocal\\_Forum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glocal_Forum)