Unit 1.2 Goals for Sustainable Development: What kind of world do people want?

Sustainable development, if it is to have meaning, must be about the development of *something*. As individuals, we are free to insist that words mean whatever we want them to. But if we want to communicate with—much less cooperate with—others, then shared meanings captured in shared goals are essential. In this class we draw from sustainability scholarship to advance and critique the following propositions about goals for sustainable development:

- The "something" that *sustainable* development should be about is people's well-being, not more traditional objectives such as an economies' GNP or a nations' security;
- The strong normative commitment of sustainable development to intra- and inter-generational equity means that its goal should be about *social* well-being, i.e. should address the fair distribution of well-being across people in multiple places and times;
- The particular constituents of well-being that matter most to different people and groups vary across circumstances, times and places, raising challenges for articulating common goals;
- An essential step toward crafting shared goals in all public policy is to distinguish between the ultimate ends that policy is meant to achieve and the multiple means that may turn out to be useful or even necessary for achieving those ends.   For sustainable development, this requires distinguishing between its ultimate goal or end (that we have argued is "equitable improvements in social well-being") and the multiple actions or means that different groups advocate to achieve that end.

Preparation for class:

a) **Read**: Matson, P., Clark, W. C., & Andersson, K. (2016). *Pursuing Sustainability: A Guide to the Science and Practice*. Princeton University Press. "Conceptualizing well-being" (pp. 20-23) and "Constituents of well-being" (pp. 23-32).
     This reading summarizes the argument for framing the overarching goal for sustainable development in terms of social well-being and its equitable distribution within and across generations. The reading focuses on the *constituents* of social well-being – the multiple dimensions on which people characterize what's most important for their sense of well-being.

b) **Read and explore:** OECD. (n.d.). *OECD Better Life Index*. Retrieved July 1, 2024, from https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/.
     How do different people around the world characterize what well-being is for them? The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has led the way in survey work to provide "bottom-up" answers to this question, grounded in the views of individuals (mostly, it must be said, from the richer parts of the world). This interactive web site provides an entry point to the methods and results of their work. You can use it to explore the constituents of well-being most important to you, and to see how your views about important constituents and their distribution compare with those of other people in other places.

c) **Read**: United Nations. (2021). *THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development*. https://sdgs.un.org/goals
     A focus on social well-being is not the only way to view the kind of world people want. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute the global community's most elaborated answer yet to the question of what sustainability should be about. The SDGs emerged from the UN Sustainable Development Summit of September 2015 as the outcome of a multiyear process in which nations, civil society groups, businesses and others negotiated what kind of world they wanted for 2030 and outlined an action agenda for reaching them. The resulting "top down" list of targets is messy (as are the results of most political negotiations) but also reflects a broad and deep consensus of international opinion leaders of a sort rarely seen. To get a sense of that consensus please review this high-level UN website.

Study Questions to help you get the most out of the readings:

I. **Characterizing your own well-being and comparing others people's "bottom up" perspectives**: Use the "Better Life Index" of the OECD assigned in reading 'b' for this unit to explore a "bottom up" view of how people see the constituents of a "better life".   Guidance on how to use the index effectively is provide in the Course Library document "OECDs Better Life Index: How to use it for the Sustainable Development course." In particular, address the following questions:
    - Which of well-being constituents identified by OECD are most important to you? Which seem to be describing the ultimate end of a "better life?" Which are better seen as means for achieving well-being? Which other items would you add to OECD's list in order to have it better capture the constituents of well-being that you would be comfortable using to define your goal for sustainable development?
    - Which are the places (of those indexed by OECD) where your vision of the good life is most likely to be realized? Least likely to be realized?
    - Compare the rankings of constituents in the two countries you identified in the preceding question. What constituents of well-being are most responsible for the differences between the two?

II. **Understanding the UN's "top down" effort to design its SDGs**: Explore the UN SDG web site assigned as reading 'c' for this unit.
    - Begin by reviewing the "History" section halfway down the home page. How did the UN SDGs come to be? Whose voices counted in articulating them? Whose were excluded?
    - Next, scroll over each of the 17 SDGs listed at the top of the page to get an idea of what they are about. Pick one or two of the 17 that most interests you and drill down on the relevant tabs to get a sense of the argument, activities and metrics behind it.
    - Which of the SDGs identified by the UN seem most important to you? Why? Which seem to be describing the ultimate ends of sustainable development? Which are better seen as means for achieving sustainable development? Which other items would you add to UN's list in order to have it better capture the what you believe should be the world's goals for sustainable development?

III. **Equity in goals for sustainable development**: In the canonical framing by the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), sustainable development must "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," thus underscoring the importance of inter-generational equity.   Later deliberations made explicit concern – present but implicit in the Brundtland formulation -- for intra-generational equity, i.e. that advances in development for some should not come at the expense of development for others. But characterizing equity is tricky.   For practice:
    - Return to the "Our World in Data" segment on changing life expectancy across generations and places that you explored in Unit 0.1 reading 'e' on the "Challenge of Sustainable Development." How do the data presented there support the author's conclusion that "The world developed from equally poor health in 1800 to great inequality in 1950 and back to more equality today – but equality on a much higher level."[*] Does his stated conclusion miss anything important about equity apparent in the data?
    - How does the OECD "Better Life…" effort treat equity? (You may find it useful to start here: https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/about/better-life-initiative/#question11). For use in the pursuit of sustainability, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the OECD treatment of equity?
    - How does the UN SDG effort treat equity? (SDG #13 explicitly focuses on some aspects of equity. Dig deeper to see how equity is (or isn't) treated in the other SDGs). For use in the pursuit of sustainability, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the UN SDG treatment of equity?
    - Would you be OK with a development pathway that resulted in continued increases of inequality but also alleviated the worst depredations of poverty? How about a pathway that involved radical reductions in the consumption that supplies our well-being today in order to assure that future

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[*] Max Roser (2015) - "Life expectancy increased in all countries of the world" Published online at OurWorldinData.org. Retrieved from: 'https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy-increased-in-all-countries-of-the-world' [Online Resource]

generations still have sufficient resources to pursue their own well-being? How would these pathways "score" on the OECD and UN treatments of sustainability goals? Why?

IV. **Negotiating common goals**: Finally, imagine that you need to negotiate a goal of sustainable development that most players on the global stage would endorse as a focus for cooperation. What would you come up with? What would your approach take from the "bottom up" OECD approach and the "top down" UN approach. Why?

Digging deeper (optional materials for further exploring frontiers in the pursuit of sustainability):

d) van Zanden, J. (2014). *How Was Life?: Global Well-being since 1820* (p. 273). OECD. https://www.oecd.org/statistics/how-was-life-9789264214262-en.htm
    A continuation of the OECD project cited in reading 'b', but looking at how visions of the good life have changed through time.

e) Lintsen, H., Veraart, F., Smits, J.-P., & Grin, J. (2018). *Well-being, Sustainability and Social Development: The Netherlands 1850-2050*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76696-6
    A multidisciplinary investigation of how contemporary peoples' views of the good life are changing over the century time scales relevant to sustainability. (Note: We hope it is easier to read for those fluent in the original Dutch).

f) Kamau, M. (with Chasek, P. S., & O'Connor, D. C.). (2018). *Transforming multilateral diplomacy: The inside story of the Sustainable Development Goals*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
    An insider's account of the political negotiations behind the UN SDGs, revealing how diverse nations, despite different visions of well-being and sustainability, negotiated the messy compromises needed to create shared global goals.

g) Taylor, C. (2024). *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment* (1st ed.). Harvard University Press.
    Most accounts of well-being or the good life acknowledge that some people (and perhaps humanity more broadly) may include among the constituents important to them not only material ones such as access to housing and water but also more spiritual or subjective ones such as the feeling that one is connected with nature. This work explores how peoples' experience of such connectedness was gradually lost through the rise of instrumentalist views through impact of the Enlightenment, and how artists of the Romantic era sought to reconnect people and nature. The book can be tough going, but the reward is a final chapter in large part devoted to the writings of Annie Dillard (e.g. her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1998). Harper Perennial).