

For a Sustainable Global Society: Learning for Empowerment and Leadership

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On behalf of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) members in 192 countries and territories around the world, I would like to offer some thoughts and proposals on the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, starting June 20.

Every year, 53,000 square kilometers of forest are lost. In many countries, water tables continue to drop, provoking chronic water shortages, and it is estimated that almost 25 percent of the planet's land area is being affected by the processes of desertification. [1] These are among the pressing issues the Rio+20 Conference must grapple with.

But as the Conference title "The Future We Want" suggests, it also represents an effort to develop a clear vision of a more ideal relationship between humankind and Earth. It is crucial that the effort to establish a vision rooted in an awareness that we are neighbors sharing this planet succeeds; and it is even more important that increasing numbers of people feel inspired to work for its realization, both individually and in solidarity with one another.

Even the most inspiring vision will become a reality only with the powerful support of civil society. It must be felt as a matter of personal commitment by large numbers of people. It must be shared, reflected in daily life and firmly established as a guideline shaping patterns of action within society.

A focus on people and their daily lives will be essential to ensure that debate on the key themes of the Conference--(1) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and (2) the institutional framework for sustainable development--is meaningful and productive. I therefore hope that the Conference's deliberations will be underpinned by a determination to enable people to become agents of change and ensure their sustained commitment and action. The future we want can be achieved only when there is a deep and personal appreciation that we are the ones who must bring it into being.

In this proposal, I would like to focus on the kind of empowerment that brings forth the truly limitless potential we all possess. It is important that a sense of leadership be fostered within each individual, generating waves of transformation within our communities and societies. Only then can we realize the goal of a sustainable global society in which the inherent dignity of life is given paramount importance.

A human scale

Addressing the significance of the upcoming Conference, Helen Clark, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), made the following powerful statement:

Sustainability is not exclusively or even primarily an environmental issue . . . It is fundamentally about how we choose to live our lives, with an awareness that everything we do has consequences for the 7 billion of us here today, as well as for the billions more who will follow, for centuries to come. [2]

Today, there are widespread calls for a paradigm shift from the pursuit of material wealth to sustainability. To achieve this, we must of course review and revise current economic and environmental policies; but this will not be enough. Rather, we must interrogate the very nature of human civilization, from the ways in which our societies are organized to the manner in which we conduct our daily lives.

This is not to deny the reality that many societies will continue to prioritize economic growth. But I believe it is necessary for all societies to reexamine the underlying objectives and rationales for growth and be clearly aware of other priorities. I hope that the Rio+20 Conference will spur deep and earnest consideration of such questions.

The devastating earthquake that struck Japan in March last year brought these issues into stark relief. The inability of a society at the highest levels of economic and social development to contain the damage wrought by this natural disaster was revealed--not only to people in Japan but throughout the world. In the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the unintended consequences of science and technology were on full display--in the large numbers of people forced to evacuate their homes, in the grave and still unmitigated scope of radioactive contamination, and in the as-yet-unknown long-term effects on people's health.

The loss of human life, the wounding of dignity, the destruction of the familiar nature and ecology of the community--such are the cruel outcomes wrought not only by natural disaster but by armed conflict and environmental degradation. In the case, for example, of climate change, no place can be fully free from risk over the long term; the impacts will be felt by all present inhabitants of Earth and, further, by future generations.

In this sense, shifting the orientation of human civilization toward sustainability requires that the issues involved be considered on an authentically human scale, within the context and experiences of daily life. This is where we must sense the full weight of life's inalienable dignity, and reflect on what is truly important to us and what we must come together to protect.

This is why it is unacceptable to consider the pursuit of sustainability as simply a matter of adjusting policies in order to find a better balance between economic and ecological imperatives. Rather, sustainability must be understood as a challenge and undertaking requiring the commitment of all individuals. At its heart, sustainability is the work of constructing a society that accords highest priority to the dignity of life--the dignity of all members of present and future generations and the biosphere that sustains us.

The pursuit of the possible

Here I am reminded of Aurelio Peccei (1908-84) who, by founding the Club of Rome, helped shape the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, the earliest precursor to the Rio+20 Conference. In the dialogue we published in 1984, he declared:

Mesmerized by our power, we do what we *can* do, not what we *ought* to do and go all the way without taking into consideration any practical *dos* and *don'ts*, or even the moral and ethical restraints that we should consider inherent in our new condition.[\[3\]](#)

I was struck by this statement, not least because it resonates at a deep level with the awareness expressed by the founding president of the Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), in his 1903 work, *The Geography of Human Life*. He sketches the following outline of the conditions prevailing in the early years of the twentieth century, when a single-minded pursuit of the possible produced a global order in which the strong preyed on the weak with little or no thought to the sacrifices entailed:

[The Great Powers] are constantly on the lookout for any opportunity for profit; in other words, any opening that might be exploited to gain an economic foothold or political advantage. Just as in the physical atmosphere areas of high pressure flow into those of low pressure, an analogous phenomenon can be seen in international power relations.[\[4\]](#)

Almost 110 years have passed since Makiguchi wrote these words; how much have things changed in the intervening decades?

Contemporary civilization continues to be enthralled by an amoral pursuit of the possible, largely unimpeded by ethical constraints. This can be seen in the ceaseless competitive quest for armaments to intimidate others and enhance one's "prestige," as well as in global economic competition waged with utter indifference to the issues of poverty and expanding income disparities.

The spiral of desire--in which ambitions and impulses at first thought to be well under control expand in tandem with their successive attainment until they entirely escape our command--lies at the heart of many of the critical challenges facing our world: the prioritization of economic growth leading to ecological degradation, financial and economic crises brought on by overheated speculation, the ultimate inhumanity of nuclear weapons . . .

The accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant of course originated in a natural disaster. But it also demonstrates the severe risks inherent in relying on energy generated through controlled nuclear reactions, risks that had been obscured by an unquestioning faith in the superiority and safety of the Japanese nuclear industry.

At the same time, the pursuit of the possible has been an important impetus to development, bringing such benefits as fulfilling essential needs for food, clothing and shelter, improving people's health and welfare and dramatically increasing the movement of both people and goods through advances in transportation and communication technologies.

Makiguchi did not deny the benefits of this pursuit, and in fact carefully noted the power of positive competition to hone and refine people's capacities and unleash their energy. "We find progress and development where competition is strong and powerful; where it is hampered, either by natural or human factors, we find stagnation, immobility and regression." [\[5\]](#)

His prime focus, however, was on the need to shift away from the kind of military, political and economic competition in which benefit is sought for oneself with no thought to the sacrifices imposed on others. He called for a new form of what he termed "humanitarian competition" in which "one protects, extends and advances the lives of others while doing the same for oneself" and "one benefits and serves the interests of others while profiting oneself." [6]

Makiguchi was seeking a qualitative transformation in the nature of competition so that the energies of desire--the impulse to do something about one's current situation--are oriented toward more valuable ends, generating happiness for both self and others.

Buddhism describes this transformation in the depths of consciousness as follows: "We burn the firewood of earthly desires and behold the fire of enlightened wisdom before our eyes." [7] Rather than allowing the anger or grief we feel about our present circumstances to find outlet in acts that harm or degrade others, we must expand and elevate those feelings to become the motivation for action to counter the social ills and threats that bring suffering to ourselves and others. Buddhism teaches that such transformation enables us to live lives that illuminate society with the qualities of courage and hope.

If we were to translate Makiguchi's vision and its resonances with Buddhist philosophy into contemporary realities, we would see a transformation of military competition into a striving among countries to deploy their capacities not simply for national security but also for "human security" in areas such as controlling the spread of infectious disease and disaster prevention and mitigation. This is because the kind of competition that spurs efforts to meet and overcome shared threats will bring desirable mutual benefit to all countries.

Likewise, political competition can be transformed from a hard-power struggle for hegemony into a soft-power competition to develop creative policy proposals, thus gaining the respect of other countries. Examples of this might be seen in the powerful solidarity of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and forward-looking governments which catalyzed each other's efforts to bring about multilateral treaties banning antipersonnel mines and cluster munitions. This achievement was made possible through the pressure brought to bear on different countries to prioritize the humanitarian imperative over the pursuit of what was technologically and militarily possible, as well as the support that was generated throughout international society as a result.

The call to establish a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, one of the overarching themes of the Rio+20 Conference, could be said to correspond to a shift in economic competition toward modes in which "one benefits and serves the interests of others while profiting oneself."

There is growing support for the creation of a system in which countries can share their best practices, build technological capacity and support other countries in the application of these technologies. This is seen as an essential means of achieving a global transition to the kind of green economy that is characterized by low-carbon emissions and the efficient utilization of resources. It is my strong hope that the Conference will reach agreements about such a system whereby countries with leading-edge experience in these fields can act on the principle of humanitarian competition. The same principle can, and I earnestly hope will, be aggressively applied along the temporal axis, in the formulation "to benefit and serve the interests of the future while profiting the present."

To many people, sustainability evokes images of various constraints being imposed upon individuals and societies. But such a narrow approach will not give rise to the kind of transformative ripple effects that are required.

Although physical resources are finite, human potential is infinite, as is our capacity to create value. The real significance of sustainability is, in my view, as a dynamic concept in which there is a striving or competition to generate positive value and share it with the world and with the future.

Put simply, efforts by people, communities and societies to benefit others bring to the fore our most positive and creative aspects. Likewise, the most profound improvement to our present condition comes when we strive for a better future. It is through such repeated efforts, with constant reference to self and other, present and future, that we can protect each other's inalienable dignity and work to build a world in which all people can live in peace and happiness.

The key here is our sense of responsibility to those with whom we share the planet, our sense of responsibility toward the future.

Grounded in the local community

Although many people, confronted with news of horrific events in different parts of the world or of the dire threats to the global ecology, are pained and feel compelled to take action, the cumulative effect of the ceaseless flow of such news can be a deepening sense of powerlessness.

Arthur and Joan Kleinman, who have been conducting joint research in cultural anthropology at Harvard University, offer this analysis of the pitfalls of our contemporary information society: "Thus, our epoch's dominating sense that complex problems can be neither understood nor fixed works with the massive globalization of images of suffering to produce moral fatigue, exhaustion of empathy, and political despair." [8]

To avoid becoming overwhelmed by these feelings, it is crucial to be grounded--to find a standpoint from which one can sense the impact of one's actions and feel one is making concrete progress in transforming reality. This, in my view, is the role of the local

community. A sense of responsibility toward the world or the future is not something that can be developed overnight, in isolation from the realities of daily living. If we cannot establish this within our immediate relationships and environment, we cannot hope to do so relative to the entire planet or the distant future.

The word "responsibility" indicates the ability or capacity to respond. It is through the persistent effort to strengthen and forge our capacity to respond to the evolving realities of the community that a sense of commitment toward all those with whom we share the planet and toward future generations is developed.

The film *A Quiet Revolution*, whose production the SGI supported and which was first shown at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, focuses on activities undertaken by ordinary citizens around the world that illustrate this principle. Produced by the Earth Council in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the film introduces the efforts of people to protect their community, its children and their future. It features villagers in Neemi in Rajasthan, India, restoring ancient traditions of rainwater harvesting; people in Slovakia, tackling chemical pollution in the Zemplinska Sirava lake; and the activities of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya to combat desertification through tree planting.

To date, the SGI has organized screenings of this film in more than fifty-five countries and territories in order to promote the message that every individual has the power to change the world.

Moved to action

The Green Belt Movement featured in *A Quiet Revolution* was started by the Kenyan environmental activist Dr. Wangari Maathai (1940-2011). It illustrates how a community-based people's movement can foster a sense of responsibility toward the future in each individual.

My meeting with Dr. Maathai, who sadly passed away last year, took place in February 2005. I am fondly reminded of the embracing smile, bright as the sun, which she broke into when I proposed the planting of a fig tree at Soka University of America in honor of her many years of effort and achievement.

To Dr. Maathai, the fig tree was a symbol of irreplaceable dignity and worth in her home community. In point of fact, it was a fig tree that motivated her to dedicate herself to a tree planting movement.

One time, returning to Kenya from the US where she was studying biological science, she visited her family in Nyeri. There she was shocked to see that the natural environment around her home had undergone serious change in just a few years. With an increased focus on profit, farmers were cutting down forests to plant cash crops. Dr. Maathai discovered that even a fig tree her mother had taught her to revere as sacred had been felled in the process.

She observed that landslides had become more common in the region and that as a consequence sources of clean drinking water were now scarce. She learned that many Kenyan women were struggling daily with problems caused by environmental degradation.

Convinced that "solutions to most of our problems must come from us," [\[9\]](#) she launched in her local community what would develop into the Green Belt Movement.

This movement, which Dr. Maathai described as "a testament to individuals' ability to change the course of environmental history," [\[10\]](#) illustrates three points of crucial importance.

The first is the consistent emphasis on ensuring that all participants were genuinely convinced of the validity of what they were doing and were able to maintain a palpable sense of achievement as the movement developed and grew. Dr. Maathai held seminars in the communities where the movement was active and encouraged people to identify the problems facing them. She would ask them what they felt the source of the problems was, and most would blame the government. While acknowledging that was largely the case, she stressed that nothing would change as long as people attributed all responsibility to the government.

She said to them: "It is your land. You own it, but you are not taking care of it. You're allowing soil erosion to take place and you could do something about it. You could plant trees." [\[11\]](#)

People planting trees would sometimes say, "I don't want to plant this tree, because it will not grow fast enough." Dr. Maathai would remind them that the trees people were harvesting today had not been planted by them, but by those who came before. Thus, it was necessary to plant trees now that would benefit the community in the future: "Like a seedling, with sun, good soil, and abundant rain, the roots of our future will bury themselves in the ground and a canopy of hope will reach into the sky." [\[12\]](#)

However lofty the purpose may be, people are not prompted to action unless they are fully convinced of its worth. It is the sincere effort to engage with individuals, carefully responding to and helping them resolve each of their questions, that leads to such conviction.

In addition to this process of continuous dialogue, the Green Belt Movement has been able to involve more and more people because its tangible results have given each participant a concrete sense of achievement. I think that here can be found the most powerful factor enabling people to participate in the movement; the joy and pride that derive from the knowledge that their actions are contributing to actual change has freed people from a sense of powerless resignation.

As Dr. Maathai stated in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

Tree planting is simple, attainable and guarantees quick, successful results within a reasonable amount of time. This sustains interest and commitment.

So, together, we have planted over 30 million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter, and income to support their children's education and household needs. The activity also creates employment and improves soils and watersheds. [13]

The second point I would like to note is that the Green Belt Movement has empowered each individual, inspiring people to live with a larger sense of purpose and bringing out their limitless innate potential.

There is a tendency to regard the movement simply in terms of the number of trees it has planted. Its greater significance, however, lies in people's empowerment, as attested by Dr. Maathai's conviction that her work was not just about planting trees; it was a movement to inspire people to take responsibility for their lives and the environment, governance and the future. When she realized that she was working not only for herself but for something larger, she grew stronger.

Through the process of people planting and nurturing trees with their own hands, the movement enabled its participants, rural women in particular, to realize it was up to them to choose between maintaining and regenerating the environment or allowing its destruction to continue.

They further came to recognize, through the regular opportunities for learning and awareness-raising the movement provided, that their efforts to plant trees and keep forests from being cleared were part of a larger mission to build a society that values democracy and social conscience and observes the rule of law, human rights and the rights of women.

Rural women, who initially came to Dr. Maathai seeking access to fuel and drinking water, grew confident as they gained experience. They began to exercise leadership in their communities, eventually assuming responsibility for community-wide projects such as managing tree nurseries, collecting rainwater and securing food resources.

The transformation from empowerment to leadership experienced by these women is reminiscent of the dramatic awakening depicted in the Lotus Sutra, which expresses the essence of Buddhism: a transformation from individuals seeking salvation to individuals taking action to help others free themselves from suffering.

Buddhism teaches that the means to fundamentally overcome our suffering do not exist outside ourselves. Through the process of awakening to and fully manifesting our unlimited inner potential, we are transformed in a way that enables us to lead others to happiness and security. This great inner transformation enables us to make our own suffering the impetus to improve society.

In this context it is relevant to introduce the example of a woman by the name of Srimala, which appears in the Buddhist canon. Her vow is recorded as follows: "If I see lonely people, people who have been jailed unjustly and have lost their freedom, people who are suffering from illness, disaster or poverty, I will not abandon them. I will bring them spiritual and material comfort." [14] Srimala is said to have lived true to her vow, devoting her life to helping those mired in suffering.

When Dr. Maathai declared, "We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds," [15] her words reverberate with just this kind of lifetime commitment to one's vow.

When one has such a commitment, one's actions are not predicated on fear of legal sanctions or the desire for personal benefit or financial reward. One remains determined regardless of adversity and refuses to rely on others to take action. It is a question of moving forward unflinchingly to fulfill one's mission, no matter how difficult it may be. Dr. Maathai described this as being energized by seeing the enormity of the task ahead of her.

This kind of community-based empowerment ignites courage and wisdom in individuals, inspiring them to take action and exercise leadership in order to improve their situation. As this approach to life becomes more internalized and established, people can work together to advance, however small each step may be, toward the fulfillment of their individual vow or mission. I think that this process can serve as the basis for building an expanding grassroots movement in pursuit of sustainability on a global scale.

The third point I would like to touch on is the efforts taken by Dr. Maathai to ensure the continuation of the movement, her emphasis on encouraging and educating younger generations.

Responding to a question about the way she always spoke of her initiatives in terms of "we" instead of "I," Dr. Maathai memorably replied: "I'm very conscious of the fact that you can't do it alone. It's teamwork. When you do it alone you run the risk that when you are no longer there nobody else will do it." [16]

While it is possible for a single individual to initiate a movement, the very nature of any attempt to achieve a great goal is that it will require many years and the cooperation of a large number of people.

The question of how to pass on the spirit of a movement from one generation to the next has often come up as a matter of urgency in the course of my discussions with various world figures engaged in efforts to resolve global issues. Among them was Sir Joseph Rotblat (1908-2005) who, as a founder of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, dedicated his life to the abolition of nuclear weapons and of war.

Dr. Rotblat had already been working tirelessly since the early days of Cold War confrontation to build a spiritual solidarity of scientists transcending borders when he supported the formation of International Student/Young Pugwash (ISYP) for a younger generation of scientists, launched in 1979. By that time he was in his seventies, but his eyes were firmly fixed on the future.

When the Russell-Einstein Manifesto warning against the perils of nuclear weapons was issued on July 9, 1955, Dr. Rotblat was the youngest of the signatories. What thoughts must have gone through his mind in the later stages of his life as he watched a stream of young scientists adopt the pledge, "I will not use my education for any purpose intended to harm human beings or the environment." [\[17\]](#)

I also have been striving to build a global solidarity of people for a world free of nuclear arms, embracing the declaration issued in 1957 by my mentor, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda (1900-58), in which he called for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Nothing is more encouraging to me than seeing young people undertaking such initiatives as the Soka Gakkai Youth Division's drive to collect 2.27 million signatures calling for a Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC), which were submitted to the United Nations in May 2010.

In order to involve children in tree planting, Dr. Maathai established tree nurseries in schools and consistently supported the participation of young people in environmental conservation. She wrote of her expectations for younger generations, as well as her vision for the future:

I have always believed that, no matter how dark the cloud, there is always a thin, silver lining, and that is what we must look for. The silver lining will come, if not to us then to the next generation or the generation after that. And maybe with that generation the lining will no longer be thin. [\[18\]](#)

It was on June 5, 1977, that Dr. Maathai initiated the Green Belt Movement when she and a group of supporters planted seven trees in Kamukunji Park in the outskirts of Nairobi. Since that day, the movement has spread throughout Kenya and to numerous countries in Africa, with as many as 40 million trees having been planted on the continent. Since 2006, when, in partnership with the UNEP and other organizations, she called for a global tree planting campaign, over 12.5 billion trees have been planted throughout the world. People everywhere were saddened to learn of her passing in September last year, but the number of trees being planted continues to grow.

This is not a miracle--far from it. It was made possible by the strong determination of Dr. Maathai and others who decided to do something about the crisis unfolding around them. Their determination elicited broad support, stirring the hearts of countless people, moving them to action. There is much to learn from the example of Dr. Maathai's activism, as we join together in the quest to create a sustainable global society.

New goals

Next, I would like to offer some specific proposals for the Rio+20 Conference, concentrating on three broad areas.

1. To generate a set of shared objectives for a sustainable future. These should provide a global vision toward which humanity can strive and serve as norms guiding the actions of the individuals who share this planet.
2. To establish a new international organization through the merger of United Nations agencies in the fields of the environment and development. This will better promote efforts for a sustainable global society centered on collaboration with the different sectors of civil society.
3. To recommend to the UN General Assembly the creation of an educational framework promoting sustainability. This will raise awareness among individuals and enable people to move from empowerment to leadership within their respective communities.

Regarding the first of these, it is vital that any new set of goals should, in addition to carrying on the spirit of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of alleviating the suffering of people forced to live in difficult and degrading conditions, be a catalyst promoting positive change among people toward the construction of a sustainable global society.

The MDGs, officially established during the Millennium Summit in 2000, were groundbreaking in their departure from prior international efforts that were focused on improving macroeconomic indicators. They stressed improving the conditions of

individuals and provided clear numerical goals in concrete time frames, such as reducing by half the percentage of people living on less than one dollar a day by 2015.

At present, it is expected that the proportion of people living in extreme poverty will have fallen to below 15 percent, easily surpassing the original target, while the poorest countries have made significant progress toward the goal of universal primary education provision, and as many as 1.8 billion people have gained access to cleaner drinking water. [19]

But even these important improvements have not necessarily been felt by people living in the most difficult economic circumstances or those socially disadvantaged due to such factors as gender, age, disability, minority status, etc. It is vital that these disparities be addressed with even greater attention and urgency than has been the case to date.

More and more people are calling for a successor arrangement covering the period after 2015. The report of the High-level Panel on Global Sustainability established by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stresses the need to establish sustainable development goals to achieve this end.

The report suggests that key issues in determining the framework for such goals should include the need for them to cover challenges to all countries rather than just developing nations, to incorporate a range of key areas that were not fully covered in the MDGs, such as climate change, biodiversity and disaster risk reduction and resilience, and to engage all stakeholders in sustainable development, including local communities, civil society and the private sector, as well as governments. [20]

This January, in my annual peace proposal issued to mark the anniversary of the founding of the SGI, I proposed that the creation of a working group to deliberate the content of these new goals be included among the agreements reached at the Rio+20 Conference. In addition to the aspects noted above, I believe that a commitment to an expansive global vision coupled with a focus on the local community should inform the process of generating sustainable development goals.

Regarding the first, a visionary commitment to the welfare of all of humankind and the global community of life should be at the heart of the new goals. Such a vision can encourage the engagement of more societies and individuals so that they strive in a humanitarian competition to make the most meaningful contribution. Core concepts that could be effectively deployed here include those I referenced earlier: human security, soft power and a green economy.

Article 26 of the Charter of the United Nations states the following objective: ". . . to promote the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources . . ." The human security benefits of disarmament concern all states, and any progress here would be highly beneficial not only to governments but to all people living on Earth today, and to future generations.

Similarly, the UN has designated this year as the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All. If states with records of achievement in this field could engage in positive competition to contribute to the diffusion of these technologies, it would help establish the infrastructure by which societies struggling with poverty can protect the lives, livelihoods and dignity of their people without increasing the burden on the environment. This would in turn greatly reduce the demands placed on the global ecosphere going into the future. A similar formula could be applied to the transition to a zero-waste society through promotion of the "3 Rs" of Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.

I feel that any new set of goals should include the kinds of targets that will broadly encourage humanitarian competition, earlier defined as actions that "benefit and serve the interests of others while profiting oneself" and "benefit and serve the interests of the future while profiting the present."

The second component is a focus on the community as the site for action. This will enable more people to palpably sense the degree to which their actions are giving rise to positive change and contributing to a sustainable future.

In one sense, the MDGs were focused on reducing negative impacts on people and societies by finding ways to alleviate the suffering of poverty and remove threats to people's lives and dignity. They were also to a large degree centered on the role and efforts of states, for example, in promoting primary education and eliminating gender disparities in educational opportunities. It is vital to continue and indeed accelerate such efforts, but it is also important to establish goals that generate positive ripple effects throughout society and which can be undertaken by any and all within the context of their immediate circumstances.

Examples of the proactive engagement of local communities might include: afforestation projects or other efforts to protect the local ecology; citizen-centered efforts to create more disaster-resilient communities; linking up with other communities to increase the degree of local production and consumption; working cooperatively to make waste reduction and recycling an intrinsic part of people's lives; and encouraging the introduction of renewable energy sources in ways appropriate to each locale, thus reducing the environmental footprint.

Local authorities and communities are central to this process, and cities have particularly key roles to play. Although cities occupy no more than 2 percent of Earth's total land area, they are responsible for the consumption of approximately 75 percent of the planet's resources and a similar proportion of the pollutants released into the atmosphere and the planet's rivers, lakes and oceans. [21] The observation that the actions and policies of the world's cities will determine the fate of Earth is fully justified.

I therefore hope that the new sustainable development goals will include targets related to cities, with a number of specific indices. This could be linked with a system enhancing cities' ability to share technical knowledge, best practices and year-to-year progress toward the achievement of these goals.

Conventional intergovernmental negotiations will probably be inadequate to the task of formulating the kind of goals that relate directly to the patterns of people's lives. I therefore strongly hope that, along with ensuring the full participation of representatives of civil society in the deliberative process, the Rio+20 Conference endeavors to generate goals that will be personally taken up by individuals and inspire cooperation toward their achievement.

Institutional framework

One of the key themes of the Rio+20 Conference is the institutional framework for sustainable development.

Behind the adoption of this theme lies concern among many governments about the slow pace of UN efforts in the field of sustainability, as well as about duplication and fragmentation of the activities of related agencies, lack of funding and inadequate coordination.

While it is of course vital that these concerns be addressed with haste, I believe that institutional reform cannot be limited to these areas. Rather, I hope that the debate will aim toward the establishment of a new international organization that can respond to the realities of the twenty-first century and serve as a pioneering model for the UN system.

Concretely, I would like to propose the establishment of a "global organization for sustainable development" that would be the outcome of a bold, qualitative transformation of the current system along the following lines:

The consolidation of relevant sections and agencies, including UNDP and UNEP;

The participation of all interested governments in deliberations related to the operation of the new organization;

A fully collaborative relationship with civil society; and

The active participation and involvement of youth.

One rationale for institutional consolidation is the importance of inclusivity, evidenced by the fact that "inclusive and sustainable development" headed the list of eight specific action areas for 2011 decided upon by the UN General Assembly. [\[22\]](#)

An approach that classifies global issues according to the nature of the threat may succeed in effecting improvement in a particular area. In light of the increasing complexity and intertwined nature of crises, however, such an approach will not succeed in fundamentally alleviating people's suffering and ensuring access to necessary social goods. We need to develop the institutional capacity to implement comprehensive responses that prioritize the actual and expressed needs of people and build the foundation for lives of dignity.

Next, regarding the need for a decision-making process that is open to the participation of all governments, at present both UNDP and UNEP are structured so that only those states that are members of the respective governing councils have a final say in decisions. In light, however, of the importance of sustainable development and the wide range of issues and sectors involved, I believe we must ensure that all states that wish to may participate in deliberations.

Today, international society faces the challenge of developing effective modes of shared action, and the establishment of a firm institutional foundation would contribute greatly to advancing this cause. Reform efforts should be guided by the goal of establishing institutional frameworks for collaborative efforts with civil society and a point of focus enabling all people to take a leadership role for the future of the planet.

The kind of institutional reform I have in mind would continue, extend and crystallize the many efforts that have been undertaken in the years since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the first global conference on international environmental issues.

The Stockholm Conference was noteworthy for the holding, parallel to intergovernmental discussions, of an NGO Forum attended by representatives of civil society and for the fact that there were calls for governments to include NGO representatives in their delegations. This was an important step toward reflecting the voices of civil society--"We the peoples" in the words of the UN Charter--in the activities of an organization marked by a strong tendency to function principally as a collection of sovereign states.

This marked the beginning of a stance of openness to the active participation of civil society that came to characterize a series of world conferences organized by the UN on such global challenges as population and food over the course of the 1970s and 1980s.

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit built on this tradition and advanced it dramatically. In addition to being the first UN Conference convened as a Summit, it was structured to facilitate participation by a broad range of actors from such fields as science and industry, as well as NGOs lacking official consultative status with the UN.

Where the Stockholm Conference was attended by only two heads of government, Rio was attended by ninety-four. Further, with a total of four times the number of participating NGOs, most of them engaged in grassroots activities in developing countries, this represented a major quantitative and qualitative advance over earlier conferences. Further, starting from the Earth Summit, a growing number of states began to include NGO representatives in their delegations to international conferences.

The German environmentalist Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, with whom I am currently conducting a serialized dialogue, has offered the following analysis of how the Earth Summit succeeded as a "huge undertaking" [23] enlisting the involvement of great numbers of the world's people.

Without that momentum and public pressure it would have been easy for some governments to leave everything to diplomatic routine and thereby let the conference fail, an outcome nearly assured by the deep divide between North and South over the central issues. [24]

Building on this hard-won record of achievement, the Rio+20 Conference should be seized upon as an opportunity to place collaboration between the UN and civil society at the very heart of any institutional restructuring.

A concrete model for this can be seen in the International Labour Organization (ILO), which adopts a tripartite system of governance consisting of the representatives of governments, business and labor. Similarly, any new organization should consider some variant of this, such as a four-party system that would ensure participation of the full spectrum of civil society actors and would consist of governments, NGOs, businesses and academic and research institutions.

Presently, the UN includes such frameworks as the Global Compact for industry and business and the Academic Impact for universities and other institutions of higher education, which enable these important actors to function as partners supporting the UN's activities. Both of these can be viewed as proactive undertakings by which different actors pursue the ethical imperative--what we *ought* to do. In this sense they share the kind of orientation I am proposing regarding the establishment of a new set of goals as discussed earlier--giving rise to positive value in the local community and society and generating change on a global scale.

The earliest draft of the outcome document issued in advance of the Rio+20 Conference emphasizes that "a fundamental prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making." [25] Establishing a solid institutional framework in this field based on the principle of facilitating collaboration between the UN and civil society will provide a precedent and practical model for creating similar institutions to tackle other global issues.

The last point I would like to discuss regarding institutional reform concerns the active engagement of young people, the members of the rising generation. Last autumn, UNEP convened a conference in which 1,400 children and youth from 118 countries gathered in Indonesia and adopted the Bandung Declaration, expressing their determination to take action. "Our planet's future--our future--is in peril. . . . We cannot wait another generation, until a Rio+40, before we act." [26]

We need to create, at the earliest opportunity, a focal point for the passion and power of youth, expressed in this declaration, so that they can move the human future in a new and more hopeful direction. I would like to call for the establishment of a "committee of the future generations" as a forum in which representatives of the youth of the world can consider paths to a sustainable future and advise the new sustainability organization on its annual plans and policies. This could further serve as a crucial node for strengthening youth action networks on a global scale.

Young people not only possess the strong desire to transform the world, they inherently possess the capacity to do so on a broad and expanding scale. The degree to which the UN is successful in drawing upon the enormous potential of youth will have a determinative impact on humanity's future.

I hope that institutional reform in this field will be guided by the principles I have outlined here. And I trust that the representatives of governments gathered at this conference will be inspired by a sense of responsibility to the future to consider fundamental reforms and to reach accords that will earn the respect and gratitude of future generations.

Learning for empowerment

The final area I would like to address concerns the establishment of an educational framework promoting sustainability. This would raise awareness among individuals and enable people to move from empowerment to leadership within their respective communities. It would encourage individuals to act as protagonists within their local community and to treasure the inalienable dignity of all people and the irreplaceable value of all that surrounds us.

Concretely, I would like to propose that the Conference recommend to the UN General Assembly the initiation of an "educational program for a sustainable global society," to start in 2015 and to follow up the work of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14).

Ten years ago, advocating the idea of such a decade to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, I stressed the importance of comprehensive awareness-raising comprising three steps: to learn, to reflect and to empower.

Since the start of the Decade in 2005, schools and NGOs have deployed great creativity toward improving the means and techniques of raising people's awareness, and as a result there has been welcome progress in encouraging learning and reflection. But unless this gives rise to empowerment and, beyond that, to the exercise of leadership, it will not generate real transformation.

I therefore urge that any successor framework to the Decade be focused on this goal--fostering the capacities of large numbers of people, who can be genuine change agents spreading waves of hope wherever they go.

"Seeds of Change: The Earth Charter and human potential," an exhibition created by the SGI and the Earth Charter Initiative which was launched at the Johannesburg Summit and has since been shown in twenty-seven countries and territories around the world, and "Seeds of Hope: Visions of sustainability, steps toward change," a renewed version of the exhibition which premiered in 2010, were both developed with the determination that they would do more than simply inform, but would serve as catalysts to encourage people to take action and exercise leadership.

This is far from easy, but as Dr. Maathai demonstrated over the course of her life, the key to moving forward in this challenge lies in educational efforts grounded in the local community. I fully share her conviction, which she expressed memorably in the following words: "Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instill in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost." [\[27\]](#)

In a book published 100 years ago, founding Soka Gakkai president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, who dedicated his life to the research and practice of humanistic education, similarly urged that education be rooted in the lived realities of the local community. Upholding the belief that people do not exist apart from the land and that we cannot consider anything divorced from its relationship with people, Makiguchi called for the establishment of a community studies program that would bring together and unify all academic subjects--in what would today be called a core curriculum--and would treat the human and natural environment of the local community as a living textbook.

His aim was not simply to have children gain generic knowledge of the geographic implications of mountains and rivers or understand the ecological connections among the living inhabitants of oceans and forests, or even to develop their general understanding of nature.

He showed no interest in making children learn "the kind of isolated facts such as tend to comprise courses in natural history and can be carried about at will." [\[28\]](#) Rather, he saw the goal of his educational program as helping children "gain a distinct awareness of the complex and multifaceted forces at work within the natural and human realms in the local community and the relationships that shape the process by which we develop and grow: to enable them to observe the myriad phenomena of nature and humanity that surround them and thus become cognizant of the subtle and exquisite mutual relationships that pertain among them all." [\[29\]](#)

He sought to encourage children to develop in the course of daily living a sense of the indissoluble bonds between people and the land, to foster appreciation for the seen and unseen ways in which the local community makes our existence possible, and to encourage a way of life in which this sense of appreciation gives rise to concrete action.

In an earlier (1903) work, *The Geography of Human Life*, Makiguchi wrote: "The noble human qualities of compassion, goodwill, friendship, kindness, earnestness and simplicity cannot be fostered outside the context of the local community." [\[30\]](#)

He also wrote this about the local community:

The knowledge and virtues that learners will require when they later become active in the larger society are all present in outline in this microcosm. If we scrupulously observe the realities that surround us, we can establish the principles which will later be necessary for understanding the world. [\[31\]](#)

Makiguchi saw the local community as the place where the various principles by which society and the world operate come together in directly observable form. His program of community studies was founded on this central awareness. Through it, he sought to instill in children the basic tenets of a contributive way of life--to work for the good of local and national society, and of humanity as a whole, based on a sense of the mutual interdependence of all life developed through the child's interactions with the local community.

Makiguchi did not consider the local community in the narrow sense of one's hometown or native place, but rather, more broadly as the foundation for one's present life--the place where one walks and lives, where one sees and hears and is moved by various events. Makiguchi understood our sense of belonging and rootedness as members of a local community to be the foundation for a consciousness of global citizenship: "To know that our life extends to the entire world. The world is our home, and all the nations within it are the field of our action." [\[32\]](#)

Drawing from Makiguchi's insights, I would like to suggest three qualities of community-based education for a successor framework to the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

- It should not stop at simply providing knowledge of the natural environment, customs and history of the local community, but should encourage feelings of affection for that community and the determination to treasure it.
- It should inspire a deep sense of appreciation for the ways in which the surrounding environment, including the productive and economic activities of others living in the community, enhances our lives: it should encourage daily actions based on that sense of appreciation.
- It should enable people to consider the issues of the local community in terms of what we must protect for the sake of future generations and the kind of society we must construct on their behalf, placing this at the heart of our way of life.

This kind of education cannot be successfully promoted simply through classroom instruction, but requires the flexible and proactive involvement of the local community to create opportunities for people of all generations and all walks of life to learn together. This should involve the entire community, transforming it into a site for lifelong learning in which the concerns and aspirations of all are shared and passed from generation to generation.

It is also important to provide regular opportunities for children to take the lead in protecting the local environment and enhancing the sustainability of the community. They should be able to point out issues and problems that might elude the observation of adults, and to offer proposals for their resolution.

Just as Dr. Maathai was able to acutely sense the crisis facing her community through the loss of the fig tree she had treasured as a symbol of her village since childhood, we must learn to read the signs in small changes before threats escalate beyond remedy. The local community is where people can take action to halt the damage before it is too late.

One aspect of global crises is that they arise from destructive spirals that impact different localities, gaining seemingly unstoppable momentum. Conversely, unless we can effectively respond to global crises, we cannot hope to protect local communities from the dangers and threats they face. This is the significance of the local community: it is a place where people can recognize small changes as the symptoms of larger issues and can, by framing this in a greater scheme of meaning, convert a sense of distress into determination and action. By protecting our respective communities and expanding solidarity among them, we can confront even the most pressing global threats. And we can engage in the kind of patient community building that will open a broad path to the sustainable global society of the future.

Contributing to transformation

The proposals I have made here regarding shared goals for sustainability, institutional reform and promotion of an educational framework grow from my sense that our key challenge here is to foster individuals capable of being change agents spreading hope wherever they go throughout their lives.

Considering the prospects for this important Conference, I am reminded of the words of Aurelio Peccei, founder of the Club of Rome, in our dialogue *Before It Is Too Late*.

There exists in each individual a natural endowment of qualities and abilities that have been left dormant but that can be brought out and employed to redress the deteriorating human condition. . . .

[This human potential] can become the trump card up our sleeve that can help us turn the tables. The innate, vital resourcefulness and intelligence intrinsically innate in every human being, from the most talented and fortunate to the most deprived and marginal, constitute the unequalled patrimony of our species, though now we squander and misuse it badly. [\[33\]](#)

It is education and learning that will turn the limitless possibilities possessed by all people--"the unequalled patrimony of our species"--into a wellspring of energy for meeting the unprecedented challenge of building a sustainable global society.

Learning can take place anywhere, wherever people come together; it is something in which we can all take part. And even when its results are not immediately apparent, it takes deep root within society and exerts an increasingly positive influence as it is passed from one generation to the next.

This is the reason the SGI's efforts to promote the resolution of global issues are always focused on the idea of empowerment--by, for and of the people.

As the titles of the exhibitions we have organized to stimulate consideration and dialogue about paths to a sustainable future--"Seeds of Change" and "Seeds of Hope"--indicate, we firmly believe that planting the seeds of a new awareness in the hearts of people is the most effective means of transforming the world. The Buddhist scriptures state: "Even a single seed, when it is planted, will grow and produce much fruit." [\[34\]](#)

In our activities to protect ecological integrity in various countries, we have always focused on education. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the SGI's Amazon Ecological Conservation Center (AECC) in Manaus, Brazil. In addition to projects to restore degraded tropical rainforest, the Center also promotes environmental education, through which local residents learn to take the lead in building a sustainable future.

Through these activities and other exchanges, it has been my honor to develop a friendship with Amadeu Thiago de Mello, one of Brazil's foremost poets who has worked for years to protect the Amazonian rainforest, "the lungs of the world."

I would like to offer, as a coda to this proposal, an impromptu verse that the poet shared with me when we met in Tokyo in April 1997.

*I live armed with love,
to perform my work singing,
to construct a new day.
Love gives everything
without holding back.
Sharing hope,
I plant the light of new life.*

*Once they tried to silence
the cry of my heart's fraternity
in the peaks of the Andes
ablaze with flames.
But I rose above those flames
and continue to sing.*

*There are no new paths,
only new ways of walking them.*

*With the pain of the dispossessed,
the dark dreams
of the child who sleeps with hunger--
I have learned:
this Earth does not belong to me alone.
And I have learned, in truth,
that the most important thing
is to work, while we still have life,
to change what needs changing,
each in our way, each where we are.*

*Vivo armado de amor
para trabalhar cantando,
na construção da manhã.
Amor dá tudo o que tem:
reparto a minha esperança
e planto a claridade
da vida nova que vem.*

*Um dia, na cordilheira dos Andes ardendo em fogo,
quiseram calar o meu coração de companheiro.
Mas atravessei o incêndio e continuo a cantar.*

*Não tenho caminho novo,
o que tenho de novo é o jeito de caminhar.*

*Com a dor dos deserdados,
com o sonho escuro da criança que dorme com fome,
aprendi que o mundo não é só meu.
Mas sobretudo aprendi que, na verdade, o que importa
antes que a vida apodreça,
é trabalhar na mudança do que é preciso mudar.*

Cada um na sua vez, cada qual no seu lugar.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Brown, *World on the Edge*.
- 2 Clark, "Human Development Report 2011," p. iv.
- 3 Peccei and Ikeda, *Before It Is Too Late*, p. 10.
- 4 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 400.
- 5 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 402.
- 6 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 399.
- 7 (Trans. from Japanese.) Nichiren, *Complete Works*, p. 710.
- 8 Kleinman, Das and Lock, eds., *Social Suffering*, p. 9.
- 9 Maathai, "Nobel Lecture."
- 10 Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement*, p. xi.
- 11 Maathai, *Unbowed*, p. 173.
- 12 Maathai, *Unbowed*, p. 289.
- 13 Maathai, "Nobel Lecture."
- 14 Wayman, *The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala*, p. 65.
- 15 Maathai, "Nobel Lecture."
- 16 Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement*, p. 136.
- 17 Student Pugwash USA, "Pledge."
- 18 Maathai, *Unbowed*, p. 290.
- 19 UN, "The Millennium Development Goals Report 2011," p. 4.
- 20 UN, "Resilient People, Resilient Planet," p. 72.
- 21 UNEP, "Statements by Local Authorities' Major Group."
- 22 Ban, "Remarks to the General Assembly."
- 23 Weizsäcker, *Earth Politics*, p. 168.
- 24 Weizsäcker, *Earth Politics*, p. 169.
- 25 UN, "The Future We Want," p. 4.
- 26 UNEP, "The Voice of Children and Youth for Rio+20."
- 27 Maathai, *Unbowed*, p. 138.
- 28 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 3, p. 59.
- 29 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 3, p. 66.
- 30 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, p. 25.
- 31 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, pp. 25-26.
- 32 (Trans. from Japanese.) Makiguchi, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, p. 13.
- 33 Peccei and Ikeda, *Before It Is Too Late*, p. 110.
- 34 (Trans. from Japanese.) Nichiren, *Complete Works*, p. 971.

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