# Sustainability: The ability to sustain "the good"

*"What is the ethical foundation for planning for a more sustainable future?"*

**The Big Picture**: There is, in my view, no simple or universal answer to this question. This fact is not to be lamented, but rather celebrated as an expression of cultural, social, and individual diversity. There are many different ethical foundations, and no single "common future", that can contribute to the building of a more sustaining world. The trick, of course, is that of finding common ground without pretending that there is only common ground. The trick is to build a solidarity of purpose that respects the diversity of motivations and values that lie behind this solidarity.

Ethics names our discussions about what is "good to be" and "right to do" in life. When these discussions become ends in themselves we lose sight of the actual subject of ethics, our moral experience. The impulse to be good and do right lies deeply embedded in the details of our embodied experience. Thus, the source of ethics lies partly beyond language and, even, beneath consciousness. Our conscious ability to say what we value rests upon lived contact with valuable people, things, and places. Moral experience is profoundly misunderstood when we try to divorce spirit, feeling and intellect from each other. Sadly, this divorce is the foundation of a good many of our practices, our social experience, today.

In its longest term and broadest meanings, I think sustainability is nothing less than the hope that we can once again recover the wholeness of our experience in our economic, scientific, technological, and political practices. This is a long way off and we must begin the transition to sustainability with the tools and opportunities to hand. There is an urgent and obvious need to become more efficient and prudent managers of natural and cultural resources. But there is also a need to sustain our capacity to imagine a world very different from the present: a world in which what is today considered a 'resource' may be experienced as sacred; a world in which laments by the overfed about the numbers of people who starve from birth to death is transformed into a 'sustained-ability' to share their wealth.

In a spirit of pragmatic realism and cultural imagination, then, this submission offers several broad principles integral to founding policy making on a more sustainable footing. A footing that supports our *ability to sustain* "the good" in social, ecological and economic relationships.

**Four Ethical Principles for Sustainable Policy**

I.	**Diversity**: *The capacity for relationship.*
	This principle affirms that (1) difference and interdependence evolve together in both cultural and ecological systems (thus, a failure to appreciate interdependence in ecological or social systems leads to the oppression of diversity, while a failure to respect the specific role and place of individuals ruptures ecological relationships); (2) ecological diversity and human diversity (cultural, social and individual) evolve together (thus, a loss of either brings with it the loss of the other).

II.	**Equity**: *The capacity for generosity*
	This principle affirms that affluence is both a state of fact (having enough) and a state of mind (knowing what is enough). It upholds the reality that social justice and environmental justice are inseparable and that respect for the inherent generosity of the earth nourishes the ability of humans to be generous to each other and to the earth in return.

III.	**Participation**: *The capacity for listening*
	This principle affirms the need for decision-making to be open, inclusive, and responsive. It affirms that social decision-making needs to be more of a conversation than a monologue and that, although it is very different from science, the knowledge that comes from direct experience of people and place has its own rationality. It ensures that expert knowledge and everyday knowledge, global and local awareness, listen to each other.

IV.	**Responsibility**: *The capacity for caring*
	This principle affirms that humans have an extraordinary capacity for taking ethical responsibility for their actions not only in response to rational principles, but also in response to people and places they care deeply about. It ensures that fact and values are not split apart, and that every aspect of culture is seen to be value-laden. It upholds the need to make visible and open for question the assumptions that shape our sense of what is most valuable in human life.