Can the precautionary principle be applied at the level of municipalities or neighborhoods? Of course it can. It's already happening.

The precautionary principle is also known as the "foresight principle," or the "principle of fore-caring." The principle says we should think carefully about what we are doing, all of us, with the aim of anticipating and avoiding trouble. We should pay attention and take responsibility for the consequences of our actions. When we discover evidence that trouble is upon us (or about to come upon us), we have a duty to take smart action to prevent harm: we should shift the burden of proof onto the source of the problem to provide full information about the available alternatives, and to explain how he or she guarantees to do much better. The precautionary principle also suggests that people who are affected by a situation or decision (especially workers and community members) should be consulted and informed about it, and should be given a real opportunity to be heard.

In this series, we are presenting ideas about how to use the precautionary principle at the local level. A few of these ideas are fully-baked, and a few are still half-baked. We welcome your thoughts on these (or other) ways that the "foresight principle," the "principle of fore-caring" can be applied locally in communities.

1. Precautionary (Least-Harm) Purchasing

Your local government can make a policy to purchase the least harmful products and services. Obviously, this requires someone to define harm. Harm can be narrowly defined as "involving toxic materials or materials that damage the natural environment and/or human health." (Or, as we'll see later on, harm could be more broadly defined.)

Government agencies purchase and use large quantities of toxic materials in public buildings and facilities (cleansers, paints, waxes, lubricants, pesticides, fungicides, etc.); in the operation of ports and harbors; in transportation systems (streets, highways, airports, trains, buses, boats, fleets of automobiles, vans and trucks, etc.); in hospitals and other medical facilities; in providing utility services such as water, street cleaning, waste removal, snow removal, stormwater management, sewage treatment, and public safety; in the maintenance of parks and public lands, and in other ways.

San Francisco: Having adopted the precautionary principle to guide all municipal policies, the city and county of San Francisco are now working out the details of a revised environmentally preferable purchasing policy.[1]

Portland, Oregon: Just last month, Portland and surrounding Multnomah County created a work group of government officials and citizens to spend the next year developing policies to minimize government's use of toxic materials based on a precautionary approach.[2]

Seattle, Washington and surrounding King County have both adopted environmentally preferable purchasing policies.[3]

As time goes on, municipalities will gain experience evaluating least-toxic products and may learn to share information so each city does not have to re-invent this wheel. The City of San Francisco has expressed interest in creating such an information-sharing network, as it evaluates the environmental impacts of products that the city purchases. [To learn more about sharing such information, contact jared.blumenfeld@ci.sf.ca.us .]

These least-harmful purchasing policies promote innovation and economic development because they invite "green" entrepreneurs to demonstrate theirwares. Thus they level the playing field for small entrepreneurs, who sometimes have a hard time competing for "mind space" at City Hall against the likes of 3M, Dow and DuPont.

Consistent with the precautionary principle, least-harm purchasing policies shift the burden of proof onto the manufacturers (or suppliers) of products and the providers of services, requiring them to reveal the chemicals and processes involved in their products. This gives city officials (and therefore the public) a new kind of "right to know" about the environmental consequences of purchased goods and services. Here the European catch-phrase for precautionary chemicals policy can be used locally: No data, no market.

Harm Defined More Broadly

But "harm" can also be defined more broadly, beyond toxic effects on the natural environment and human health. "Least harm" can be taken to include least harm to the local economy, and least harm to the relationships of respect, trust, caring and reciprocity that are the glue holding communities together.

Here we can imagine the precautionary principle beginning to be applied to social relations, not merely physical or biological or chemical relations.

As background for the rest of this "Precautionary Mister Rogers" series, here are 17 "rules" that Wendell Berry published a few years ago in his essay, "Conserving Communities."[4] Berry was writing mainly about rural communities -- and not specifically about the precautionary principle -- but his 17 rules could provide precautionary guidance to urban neighborhoods and even whole cities seeking to avoid modern economic and social harms:

1. Always ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community? How will this affect our common wealth?

2. Always include local nature -- the land, the water, the air, the native creatures -- within the membership of the community.
3. Always ask how local needs might be supplied from local sources, including the mutual help of neighbors.

4. Always supply local needs first (and only then think of exporting their products, first to nearby cities, and then to others.)

5. Understand the unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of "labor saving" if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any kind of pollution or contamination.

6. Develop properly scaled value-adding industries for local products to ensure that the community does not become merely a colony of the national or global economy.

7. Develop small-scale industries and businesses to support the local farm and/or forest economy.

8. Strive to produce as much of the community's own energy as possible.

9. Strive to increase earnings (in whatever form) within the community and decrease expenditures outside the community.

10. Make sure that money paid into the local economy circulates within the community for as long as possible before it is paid out.

11. Make the community able to invest in itself by maintaining its properties, keeping itself clean (without dirtying some other place), caring for its old people, teaching its children.

12. See that the old and the young take care of one another. The young must learn from the old, not necessarily and not always in school. There must be no institutionalized "child care" and "homes for the aged." The community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young.

13. Account for costs now conventionally hidden or "externalized." Whenever possible, these costs must be debited against monetary income.

14. Look into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programs, systems of barter, and the like.

15. Always be aware of the economic value of neighborly acts. In our time the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, leaving people to face their calamities alone.

16. A rural community should always be acquainted with, and complexly connected with, community-minded people in nearby towns and cities.

17. A sustainable rural economy will be dependent on urban consumers loyal to local products. Therefore, we are talking about an economy that will always be more cooperative than competitive.

Sometimes precautionary purchasing policies can embrace both kinds of harm -- reducing toxic exposures while boosting the local economy. Here's an example, provided by one of our readers, Ed Soph, of Denton, Texas (population 90,000):

"Our environmental organization, Citizens for Healthy Growth, has been guided by the [precautionary] principle since the group was formed in late 1997 to stop a copper wire manufacturer, United Copper Industries, from obtaining an air permit that would have allowed lead emissions.

"The principle helped again in 2001 when a resident discovered that 2,4-D, simazine, Dicamba, and MCPP were being sprayed in the city parks. The adoption of an Integrated Pest Management program was urged, the question being, given the "suspected" dangers of these chemicals, should the city regard those suspicions as a reassurance of the chemicals' safety or as a warning of their potential dangers? Should the city act out of ignorance or out of common sense and precaution?

"A focus group of park users was formed and a pilot IPM [integrated pest management] program was begun in a select number of parks. System-wide, however, all use of 2,4-D, simazine, Dicamba, and MCPP has been suspended....

"As well as keeping our parks safe, the IPM brought an unexpected economic benefit to the community. Of great concern was the cost of the corn gluten meal that is used as a turf builder and weed deterrent. The city had to order it from a producer in the mid west and, with shipping, the cost was high. Fortunately, it was discovered that a local company that produced the gluten as a by-product of its milling operation could supply the material at a considerable savings.

"The Parks Dept. gets the corn gluten meal from a local producer. Now, the precautionary principle guides the latest project. After two years of prodding, the city has finally admitted that the Industrial Performance Standards that protect our air from toxic chemical pollution are "antiquated" and useless. Benzene, toluene, and xylene cannot be discharged into our wastewater system but they are allowed to poison our air. A campaign is underway to enact air ordinances that protect the future air quality of our community. With persistence, the common sense of the precautionary principle will again succeed."[5]

The precautionary principle is forward-thinking and visionary; it urges smart action. Its aim is deliberate, careful, wise choices, leading toward long-term prosperity and well-being.

Wendell Berry warns us against the alternative:

"We are now pretty obviously facing the possibility of a world that the supranational corporations, and the governments and educational systems that serve them, will control entirely for their own enrichment -- and, incidentally and inescapably, for the impoverishment of all the rest of us. This will be a world in which the cultures that preserve nature and rural life will simply be disallowed. It will be, as our experience already suggests, a postagricultural world. But as we now begin to see, you cannot have a postagricultural world that is not also postdemocratic, postreligious, postnatural -- in other words, it will be posthuman, contrary to the best that we have meant by 'humanity.'"[4]"
* This series is a collaborative effort of Peter Montague and Maria B. Pellerano of Environmental Research Foundation, and Carolyn Raffensperger and Nancy J. Myers of the Science and Environmental Health Network (www.sehn.org). Any errors or lapses in the published version are Montague's alone.


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