What is a “sustainable” economy?[1] To maintain life, humans require a steady flow of physical materials and energy. We require coal, oil, natural gas for heat and transportation; wood for buildings and for paper; food for sustenance. Only nature can create all these resources. Nature’s most basic process uses solar energy to convert carbon dioxide, water, and minerals into plants, the basis of all food chains.

Our economy provides us with goods and services, all of which derive from the materials and energy that nature produces. A SUSTAINABLE economy uses the essential products and processes of nature no more quickly than nature can renew them. Furthermore, a SUSTAINABLE economy discharges wastes no more quickly than nature can absorb them.[2,pg.7]

This definition of a sustainable economy can be translated (roughly) into measurable quantities: how much land surface is required to produce the flows of materials and energy that sustain us? For example, our production of carbon dioxide (CO2), which warming the planet via the greenhouse effect (REHW #429, #430), can be translated into an area of forest that would absorb the carbon dioxide we are releasing. If we set aside enough forest to absorb all the carbon dioxide we release, then we would achieve a sustainable balance between CO2 creation and disposal.

This approach, which is called “ecological footprint analysis,” was invented by William Rees at the University of British Columbia in Canada. Ecological footprint analysis reveals some important facts about our current life style: for example, on average, each person in the U.S. requires 5.1 hectares (12.6 acres) to create the flows of materials and energy that sustain our lifestyle.[2,pg.85] Unfortunately, if you take all the available ecologically productive land on the planet and divide it by the number of humans living today, you find that, on average, there are only 1.5 hectares (3.7 acres) available for each person.[2,pgs.54,88] Therefore, this kind of analysis tells us that the whole world cannot ever achieve the hedonistic lifestyle of Americans. There just isn't enough land to sustain it. In fact, to support the entire human population in the lifestyle of Americans (or Europeans) would require roughly three additional planets the size of planet Earth.[2,pgs.90-91]

We can learn something else from this kind of analysis. Each U.S. citizen requires 5.1 hectares of land, but if you divide the area of the U.S. by the population of the U.S., you find that only 2.8 hectares of land are available for each citizen. This means that the difference, 5.1 - 2.8 = 2.3 hectares per person, is land that belongs to someone else but is being used to sustain the U.S. population. Land that is supporting a U.S. citizen cannot simultaneously support another person somewhere else, so we are borrowing (or buying or stealing) someone else's current or future well being.

If we acknowledge these facts, we are faced with several dilemmas. As William Rees points out,[2] more material growth, at least in the poor countries, will be needed to bring people out of poverty, yet any global increase in the flow of materials and energy is ecologically unsustainable. This means that humans cannot continue on their current path. In particular, the wealthy members of the human family (in other words, the average members of every industrialized society) face an uncomfortable moral challenge: while we use up three times our fair share of the planet's resources, at least a billion people don't get the minimum number of food calories needed to sustain life. Furthermore, just meeting current demands is undermining the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Conventional strategies for economic development seem ecologically dangerous and morally bankrupt.

Likewise, within the U.S. itself, conventional strategies for economic development seem to be working AGAINST the environment and AGAINST the people. Here’s an optimistic assessment from the U.S. Secretary of Labor in January, 1997: Jobs are being created at a steady pace, but plant closings, insufficient work, and elimination of positions have caused the loss of 8% of the nation's permanent jobs every two years. Eight percent of permanent jobs were lost in 1989-91; another 8% were lost during 1991-93 and another 8% disappeared during 1993-95.[3] What we find in place of these good jobs is temporary part-time work at reduced wages with few benefits.

Real wages have fallen more than 10% since 1985. Meanwhile the gap between the well-to-do and everyone else has been growing steadily for more than 15 years: the rich are getting richer compared to the rest of us. If you divide American society into 5 groups, each representing 20% of the total, the incomes of the wealthiest 20% rose 26% between 1979 and 1995, while the incomes of the middle 20% rose only 1% and the incomes of the bottom 20% actually DECREASED 9%. Benefits are disappearing as well: between 1983 and 1993, the percentage of full-time employees participating in employer-sponsored health plans fell from 95% to 83%.[3]

Wealth is even more inequitably distributed than income. Between 1983 and 1992, an astonishing 99% of the increase in the nation's wealth was scooped up by the richest 20% of the people.[3]

Amid this economic decline, we find that the nation's future is jeopardized by spillover effects. Here is how the NEW YORK TIMES described it in a 1994 editorial:

"America's youngest children are in serious trouble, according to a panel of experts brought together by the Carnegie Corporation. So many children are growing up without adequate medical and nutritional care, intellectual stimulation or emotional security that the nation's ability to produce healthy workers and citizens is in jeopardy."[4] Since the 1970s, parents have worked longer hours but earned less money, leaving them less time and fewer resources to devote to their children's well being. One root cause of all these problems is our view of the economy. The economy was once seen as a means to an end; it was to enable people to enjoy a good life. Today the economy has become something different. Both people and the environment are sacrificed to maintain the economy--or, more specifically, to maintain existing relationships of wealth and power.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We are not helpless in the face of "the market." People--even people at the local level--can control investments that either create or destroy good jobs. By establishing "early warning" networks, we can identify firms in trouble and take steps to help them recover. Tax policy can help us or hurt us. If we come to see the environment as an essential asset, local and national policies can preserve natural resources as part of economic renewal.[5]

Now a new organization called Sustainable America (SA) has appeared on the scene, aiming to tackle both the economy AND sustainability head-on. SA held its founding convention in Atlanta two weeks ago; 85 people from 25 states and 3 Indian nations gathered to affirm their commitment to local economic renewal.

As Executive Director Elaine Gross explained in Atlanta, SA is a national membership organization concerned about the direction of our local and national economies. SA's member groups are responding to decline by organizing locally and coming together nationally to promote policy alternatives that offer a greater degree of citizen control, economic stability, prudent use of ecological resources, and a greater degree of economic equity.

The membership includes both national and local organizations (and individuals) representing labor, economic development, environmental, religious, educational, policy and community leaders.
SA’s national office will strengthen the infrastructure that nurtures the local and joint work of its members. The infrastructure includes:

** a Technical Assistance Bank that will allow members to share best practices and various skills amongst each other;
** a clearinghouse that makes available to its members publications, research results, and other information;
** work/study groups that facilitate high-quality networking through collective learning, problem solving and resource sharing;
** conferences, forums and workshops for the membership to promote cross-fertilization and to increase the knowledge base of the membership;
** policy campaigns that alter institutional or structural barriers to SA’s work.

SA has three strategic approaches:

Be pragmatic:

** focus on high-quality networking and technical assistance among local groups doing the work;
** build an infrastructure that promotes (a) technical competence, (b) ongoing collaboration and (c) joint action; ** seek insights into the challenges of organizing and movement-building to further this work.

Be bold:

** Pick projects that influence the mainstream economy, encourage experiments but seek to avoid marginalization by “scaling up” activities whenever possible.

Be broad-based and politically strong:

** Reach out across the country and into diverse communities, across disciplines and issue areas, building a movement for sustainable economic development.

SA has four programs:

1. Community Capacity Building -Providing tools to understand our local economies and environments better and to create a new economic vision; strengthening our local organizations; educating local citizens; and building broad-based coalitions.

2. Democratic Control (institutional accountability and worker organizing) --Creating the framework, structures and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that communities and workers control the economic institutions that affect them --from business to government.

3. Business/Economic Development --Getting community/labor coalitions more directly involved in job creation and retention--from the service sector to manufacturing.

4. Capital Use and Control -Capturing our money and directing public funds toward the creation of real jobs; and using our capital resources (for example, natural resources) more wisely.

The economy doesn’t have to work against people or against the environment. But up until now, local environmental and economic development work have gone on in a kind of vacuum --the economic development folks and the environmentalists ignoring each other. Now at last they are coming together.

If everyone piles on, this could be really big.

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--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

[1] The issue of sustainability was first raised by Gro Harlem Brundtland and others, OUR COMMON FUTURE (N.Y. and London: Oxford University Press, 1987). The "Brundtland Commission" defined sustainability as meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."


Descriptor terms: economic development; economy; jobs; ecological footprint; william rees; mathis wackernagel; sustainable america; elaine gross; technical assistance; thomas michael power; income; wealth;