



## Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Future

### Overview

While the topic of sustainability has captured headlines on a global basis, little progress is being made to address the situation because ideology has overtaken reasoned discussion. Positions are now staked at the polar extremes, locked in the circular debate whether environmental disaster can be averted without sacrificing economic growth. The result is that movement has become stalled in achieving a consensus direction on how to proceed.

A workshop conducted in the state capitol building of Texas sought to break through the ideological impasse by bringing all interests to the table. Sponsored by the Center for a Livable World at Stephen F. Austin State University, representatives from corporations, non-governmental organizations, public policy agencies, and academia met in closed-door sessions for 1 ½ days to develop a set of recommendations to which all participants could subscribe. It is now clear a roadmap does exist that can drive the discussion of sustainability in a direction that bridges differences.

Sustainability is difficult to talk about, in part, due to the absence of a standard definition. To provide a common frame of reference, we agreed to adopt a meaning developed at a United Nations conference in which sustainability is understood as the effort to “meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” The goal of sustainability, in other words, is to ensure the world remains livable now and forever.

While it is easy to conclude the world should get no worse, what has been lacking is a shared vision on how to produce this outcome. The workshop managed to formulate a wide-ranging set of practical recommendations to guide the effort. The participants, however, want to emphasize two points. First, the workshop was successful despite ideological conflicts because dialogue was kept civil. It is important to recognize that differences do not necessarily impede progress. Second, resource supply and use patterns, especially as they impact population, require a more inclusive social conversation to identify a path that cuts across value divisions. Some policy solutions will demand more time to make headway.

### Recommendations

#### 1. The Role of Education

A public commitment to sustainability requires a shift in culture that cannot be accomplished by relying on the government alone. While a change in habits can be imposed by law, sustainability ultimately depends upon the cooperation of almost every individual in adopting new patterns of behavior. Personal responsibility is, at bottom, the key to preserving a livable world and education is the best vehicle to bring about this cultural shift. A public literate about sustainability will be better equipped to make informed decisions and follow through with or without legal threats.

The following recommendations outline the minimal steps that should be taken:

- Integrate concepts related to community well-being, localism, sustainability, internet use, and civic responsibility into the educational curriculum at all levels;
- Encourage more opportunities for students to obtain practical experience related to sustainability outside of the classroom (such as service learning, internships, and science fairs);
- Emphasize the importance of vocational/technical education about sustainable occupations as well as the role of sustainability in all occupations;
- Provide continuing education opportunities for adults focusing on sustainability (such as organic gardening, energy efficient home conversion, and transportation alternatives);
- Incorporate licensure or certification on sustainability for professional degree programs (such as MBAs) and through continuing education units;
- Provide consumers with enough information to make informed buying decisions that promote sustainability;
- Require transparency in product labeling and product ingredient information so that consumers can be informed about sustainability metrics, including life cycle, impacts, resource consumption, and intensity (e.g., gallons of water per widget produced, kilowatt-hours consumed per square foot).

## 2. Consistent Standards

Sustainability is a global concern that cannot be resolved by nations acting in isolation. Resources are not distributed uniformly enough around the globe to tolerate neglect of sustainability as a public policy priority much longer. An international dialogue is necessary to ensure that countries apply compatible regulatory standards where possible. Otherwise, products and services that degrade the environment will always find access to the marketplace. The public must be made aware that economic growth and sustainability are not entirely mutually exclusive. These responsibilities belong to all levels of government: national, regional, and local. Any weak link will be exploited to the detriment of all.

The following recommendations outline the minimal steps that should be taken:

- Standardize criteria for sustainably produced consumables from field to table, including carbon intensity for all goods and post-consumer recycled content for all manufactured goods;
- Encourage trade groups and associations to develop standards and measures on sustainability specific to their industry;
- Promote a zero-waste production goal through policy, incentives, and regulation;
- Create international energy efficiency and emissions standards for global transportation systems;
- Recognize and license businesses that promote the social, environmental, and economic well-being of the communities they serve;
- Reform tax codes to include consideration of non-economic sustainability impacts;
- Conduct comprehensive cost-benefit and lifecycle analyses that include non-economic sustainability factors in contracts, projects, programs, and policies;
- Reformulate measures of economic output to include social well-being, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity.

## 3. Community Planning

Sustainability is about quality of life. Since communities are the places where daily life is experienced, the development of sustainable practices must begin here. Communities must be brought into engagement to agree upon measures that have widespread support. Sustainability is more likely to succeed if people have a personal investment in the policies that shape their lives. Engagement is especially important because communities differ in terms of values, needs, resources, and economic diversity. No template exists; each community must define its own formula on how to achieve a livable existence.

The following recommendations outline the minimal steps that should be taken:

- Identify and eliminate economic disincentives to sustainability that apply equally to the government and the private sector;
- Increase the use of renewable resources and the recovery of precious materials while discouraging non-compostable/non-recyclable waste;
- Complete an updatable and accurate inventory of environmental services provided by common natural features (e.g., trees, soils, wetlands) to document their social, environmental, and economic benefits;
- Implement uniform building codes consistent with responsible consumption and sustainability;
- Engage community stakeholders in identifying and addressing local issues related to well-being and sustainability as part of the master-planning process;
- Provide access to technical assistance to develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate sustainability initiatives;
- Facilitate local sustainable projects such as: development of green infrastructure/subdivisions, community gardens/farmers' markets, and the use of resources and land in multi-objective ways;
- Use sustainable development as an explicit economic development tool;
- Design and conduct energy efficiency retrofit programs for low-income households.

## Conclusion

Movement toward sustainable public policies should not be further delayed by political in-fighting. We have demonstrated that consensus can be accomplished through reasoned discussion. We strongly urge policymakers to reflect upon the proposed recommendations. They will not solve all problems but they constitute a social strategy that has no ideological bias. The excuse for inaction has been removed.