

# Sustainability and a Good Society

by Joe Cox, March 2015

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# How do we achieve a Good Society with environmental justice at its heart?

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This short publication is designed for activists campaigning for environmental and social justice. Its aim is to equip you with the arguments, facts and tools to make your activism more effective.

It's the result of many conversations with activists, professional campaigners and thinkers over the past few months. Thanks so much to everyone who took the time to talk to me or make suggested edits.

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This publication aims to do the following:

- Explain why sustainability, greater equality and social justice are interlinked and can only be achieved through a broader political project

- Explore how we can make a just transition to sustainability

- Develop a criteria for what type of interventions can create genuine and lasting change

- Give examples of interventions that could create genuine and lasting political change

- Empower you to talk about issues of environmental justice in a more accessible and popular way

- Introduce you to useful activities which can make your activism more effective

- Help you offer a glimpse of a future we all want to live in

We hope you find it of use in your quest to build a Good Society. We'd love to hear your feedback as we continue to develop our thinking – tweet us at [@compassoffice](#) or email Joe at [joe@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:joe@compassonline.org.uk)

# Context

## Like many aspects of politics this is the worst of times and the best of times

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Like many aspects of politics this is the worst of times and the best of times. We are on course for runaway climate change unless we dramatically reduce our carbon emissions by 2020. Whilst there is currently more optimism around global climate negotiations than there was recently, we're still a long way to achieving the scale of change necessary. Climate change aside, we're also breaching planetary boundaries in terms of biodiversity and nitrogen. This is shown vividly in the graph on the next page which is taken from the 2009 report by Rockstrom et al.

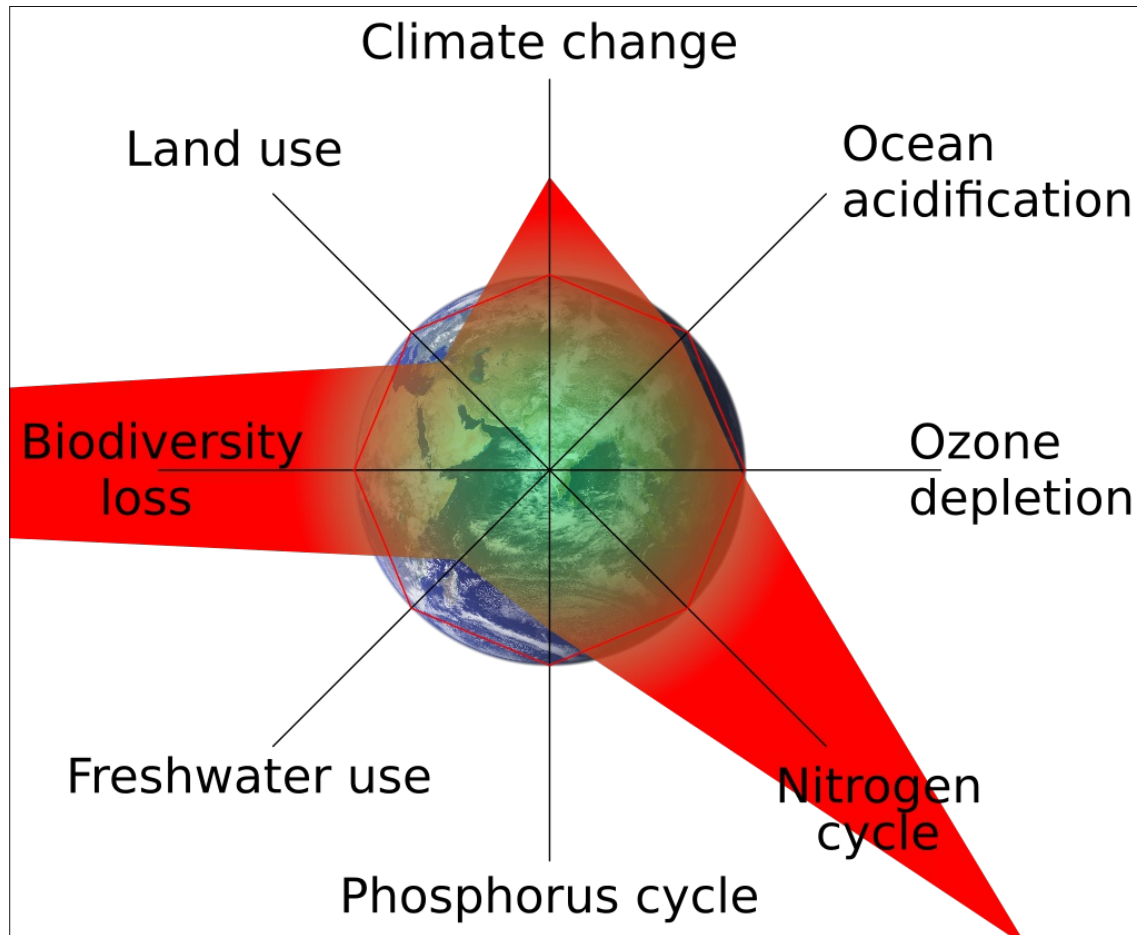
Despite living beyond our environmental means and continuing to pursue economic growth at almost all costs, the rich world is no longer deriving benefits in terms of health or happiness from this model. By using more than its fair share of the world's resources the rich world also makes it impossible for developing countries to grow their economies and stay within environmental limits. For this reason anyone that hopes to create a more sustainable world should think about environmental justice in terms of a broader political, cultural and democratic mission to create a Good Society. The link between sustainability and other issues of social justice,

especially equality is summed up brilliantly by Wilkinson and Pickett:

“Greater equality is then a key objective, not only because it reduces social dysfunction and improves health and wellbeing, but also because it makes it possible to overcome some of the main obstacles to sustainability. The most important of these is consumerism, which, driven by status competition, intensifies the demand for ever higher incomes and leads people to see sustainability simply as a threat to living standards.”

Whilst this briefing started by talking about how we can create a sustainable world you will see that it quickly starts to touch upon on issues of inequality, power, movement building and much else. If there is one thing that I hope readers take away from this it is that creating a just and sustainable world will require us to think in a joined up way about how we create lasting and genuine progressive change.

Despite the challenging context, climate leadership and innovation is emerging all around US...



Despite the challenging context, climate leadership and innovation is emerging all around us; the cost of solar is plummeting leading to the proliferation of decentralised energy; trade unions, through for example, Green workplaces projects, are increasingly engaged, the resilient communities movement is growing and many cities are setting ambitious decarbonisation targets. Huge demonstrations have recently taken place in big cities the world over demanding action on climate change.

The movement from below is as exciting as ever, and as we know, this is what brings about real societal change.

# Creating a sustainable world will require us to think in a joined up way about how we create lasting and genuine progressive change

## Vehicles for Change

Many of the systems we organise our society and economy around have in-built resistance to change. These systems have multiple aspects of resistance; from inequalities of power and wealth, culture to infrastructure. Therefore we have to explore what vehicles exist to bring about this multi-layered just transition and how we collaborate in pursuit of this bigger goal of a Good Society.

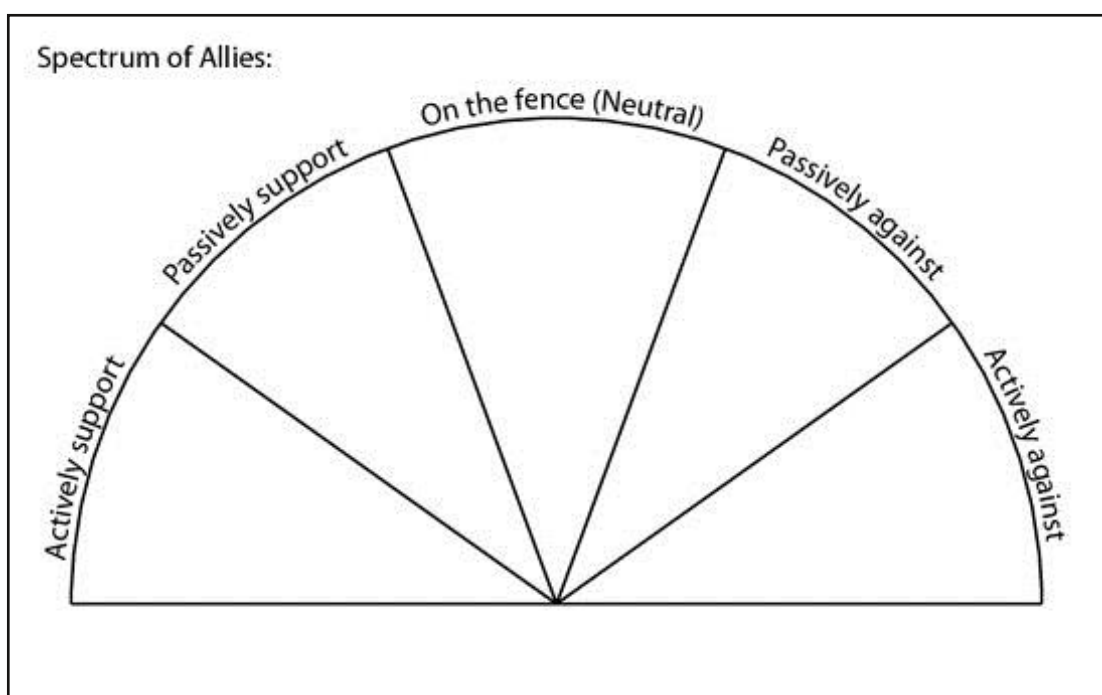
Activity: One useful way of thinking about mapping out a campaign or social movement is plotting out a spectrum of allies analysis. The aim of a campaign or social movement is to shift the spectrum to the left.

- You can conduct a spectrum of allies analysis on your own as a thought experiment or as a group exercise

- Choose which social movement or campaign you are analysing. For this exercise we suggest you plot the just transition to a sustainable society

- Moving from left to right name individuals and organisations that fit into each group

- Keep in mind the link between environmental and social justice



# Creating a sustainable world will require us to think in a joined up way about how we create lasting and genuine progressive change

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Questions for thought or discussion might include:

- How do we pull the centre of gravity to the left? Is it simply a case of putting more pressure on passive supporters or can you work with passive supporters in an under the radar way? An example of successfully shifting an organisation from a passive to active position can be seen recently when the British Medical Association voted to divest from fossil fuels. Knowing how to engage with different types of organisations is therefore key.

- How do we avoid just speaking to active supporters?

- Where do unlikely allies fit in? For example certain technologies such as community energy ownership offer opportunities to reach beyond the traditional left/right divide. This has led to 'Green Tea' coalition popping up in the United States. Short term alliances over specific issues are often useful but be mindful that whilst making short term tactical alliances often yields benefits it is also necessary to develop the movement for broader systemic change.

- What is the link between horizontal & grassroots activism and hierarchical action such as through political parties?

- What broader political reforms are needed and how does that effect who you have listed in your spectrum?

- What sort of organisations & movements do not currently exist that are required?

# What policies, interventions and projects that could begin to bring about the just transition to a sustainable society?

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## Systemic interventions

Some useful criteria for choosing these interventions and policy includes:

- Sustainability; does it reduce the throughput of raw materials and impacts on ecosystems?
- Social justice; does it do so in an equitable way that reduces economic inequality?
- Security & resilience; does it make people and communities more resilient to outside shocks such as extreme weather or rises in unemployment?

Some more general rules for strategic interventions are below :

- Aim to fundamentally disrupt the power relations of the system (either by tackling powerful political and economic forces or by building a new power base)
- Choose targets which you can plausibly make progress on (progress does not always mean winning a campaign goal, laying the groundwork for future wins is important).
- Where possible ensure your issue tells a story about the wider political mission of a Good Society (based on the values that underpin your vision).
- Build the broader progressive movement (do not harm the long term causes of yours or other systemic

campaigns for short term wins, instead increase the movement's diversity, build the movement's capacity and develop its collective story etc.)

- Choose an intervention that will allow you to do something tomorrow that you can't do today (because there are more of us, we have new skills and we have momentum. In short, there is an answer to the question: "and then...")
- Act in alignment with the values we want to bring about or as we often say: 'be the change'.

Activity: Another exercise you could try out is creating your own criteria. The idea is to emerge with a useful set of criteria for deciding which interventions could create lasting and genuine change. This should help you and your group become more strategic in your campaigning.



With that in mind, below are three exciting interventions that tick many of these boxes.

## Community Energy

The potential support for community energy is huge, with anger towards the big six providers at record levels. It also has the potential to unite those who do not identify as 'green' as it offers the potential for good investment returns and community funding benefits.

Community energy also encourages people to take responsibility for their consumption and can be done in a democratic and empowering way that shifts assets and wealth to communities.

So how do we get from a high carbon centralised energy system to a low carbon decentralised model? This requires a managed decline of the former and a replacement with the latter. At a central government level this requires a few policies:

- An end to tax breaks for fossil fuel extraction
- An end to subsidies for centralised and/or high carbon energy such as new nuclear
- Certainty over levels of Feed In Tariffs to give low carbon investors and businesses confidence
- Mandatory local share offers on large projects

- Improved grid connections
- Energy decarbonisation targets and roadmaps to implementation
- Stronger incentives for community renewable schemes

Local renewable energy schemes are emerging across the country and are a vital avenue for giving ownership back to people and communities.

## Case Study – Repowering London

Repowering London promote and facilitate the widescale development and local ownership of renewable energy projects across South London. So far, Repowering London has installed 132kWp of community owned renewable energy, saving almost 60 tonnes CO2 per annum.

As well as the carbon emissions saved a percentage of the profit is used to help local people understand the simple changes they can make to reduce their energy bills.

The scheme promotes local leadership through co-operative community engagement as well as training and employment opportunities for local people.

For more information visit <http://www.repowering.org.uk/>



## Energy Efficiency

Domestic energy efficiency projects have a similar ability to unite those that do not identify as 'green' as they create local jobs and lower energy bills. It's clear that the Green Deal, even with reforms, will not achieve housing retrofit fast enough to decarbonise significantly and lower energy bills in the UK.

At a central government level an ambitious energy efficiency scheme requires:

- A serious commitment would be a target to retrofit half a million low income homes a year from 2015 to 2020 (EPC Band C standard)
- Local authority targets for housing retrofit
- Funding: this could come from allocating existing carbon taxes, from general taxation, quantitative easing or allowing the Green Investment Bank to borrow.

## Case Study – Kirklees

Kirklees council is seen as the trailblazer for this work. Between 2007-2010 'Warm Zone' offered free cavity and loft insulation, free low energy light bulbs and interest free loans for renewable technologies to their 400,000 residents. The project reached over 130,000 households, boosted the local economy and cut fuel bills. Whilst the investment was significant, the benefits to mental well-being and physical health were estimated to recoup 36p in the £ over a lifespan of likely impacts.

For more see

<http://www.energybillrevolution.org/>

## Leave Our Kids Alone

Not all pro-environmental campaigns have to be explicitly about the environment. For example protecting children from advertising would mean our children would be less likely to grow up being materialistic and this can only be good for our environment as curbing over-consumption is central to achieving sustainability. It's commonsense that we protect our children from certain influences before they can make informed choices so this is another issue where broad political agreement could be forged.

To support the campaign visit <http://www.leaveourkidsalone.org/>

# It is vital that we can offer a compelling vision of a more optimistic future

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With increasingly frequent extreme weather and ongoing economic and social insecurity it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the scale of the political and economic transition required. For that reason it is vital that progressives can offer a compelling vision of a more optimistic future.

Below are some ways life would change if we are to make a just transition, explained in clear ways.

- Resources and emissions caps. By making clear how much we can and can't burn/extract and consume we'll stop pretending we can continue on this unsustainable path forever. Some things like coal powered electricity and flying would become more expensive. Emphasis will be given by the economic system to the direct provision of adequate basic needs for all (housing, education, health, food security).

- Tax reform. We'd tax more of the things we don't like – like pollution and concentrations of wealth in the hands of a small minority. We'd tax less of what we do like, like income. People would see a reduction in personal taxation but some polluting products would become more expensive.

- Commons rights. More of our natural resources like forests, fisheries, water, urban spaces would be owned and managed by all of us in common, ensuring their stewardship for future generations.

- Investing in infrastructure would create hundreds of thousands of jobs in housing retrofit, renewable energy, public transport and public spaces. The jobs we would lose from old unsustainable industries would be more than replaced through this investment.

- Stricter regulation of banks and their ability to create money would mean debt is less readily available to us. At the same time we'd have more opportunities for stable savings and economic bubbles, like that in the housing market would be less common.

- The average working week would be shorter meaning unemployment and over-work would be reduced leaving us more time to do other things outside of the 'work to earn to spend treadmill'. Importantly this would allow us to spend more of our time as active citizens remaking our world.

- Reducing income and wealth inequality would mean that ordinary

people get a bigger slice of the pie, even if the size of the pie isn't increasing. This requires greater taxation of wealth and finance as well as creating new ways for ordinary people to own assets like sovereign wealth funds and citizens dividends.

- Part of what keeps the economy ticking over is endless consumption – it's so engrained in us now that we try to define ourselves through what we buy and has led to widespread social anxiety. By tackling the pressure to consume through clamping down on advertising and ultimately, by consuming less we'd actually be freer to live the lives we want to.

### Tips for Framing

Here are a few suggestions and rules of thumb for communicating this vision:

- Paint a positive picture of sustainable communities - not just policies or targets but more concrete stories. A vision of clean local parks, walkable cities, good local jobs, free public transport, clean air and vibrant public spaces is more likely to motivate people than a vision of 20% cuts to GHG emissions.

- It can be self-defeating to talk about 'the economy' in the abstract as it implies the economy is an 'other' which exists outside of people and nature. Instead talk about what a changing our economic system could deliver us. This can mean real prosperity, good jobs in every community, warm homes, and

more time to spend with friends.

- Mention the consequences of not taking action to make our society sustainable but too much focus on this may lead to a sense of hopelessness. Ensure that each time a threat from inaction is mentioned to balance it with possible action and a positive vision that results from that successful action.

- If you do mention more abstract concepts, like renewable energy refer to more concrete examples (wind power or solar panels.) Likewise clean/polluting are better (more everyday) frames than low carbon/high carbon.

- Ensure that the link between fairness and sustainability is affirmed – we're making an argument for a Good Society in which people flourish, not just a sustainable one.

- Try to infuse your communications & interventions with a sense of citizenship and co-operation. People like to feel like they're co-operating in an endeavour to make their place or society better, not just making an individual sacrifice. Consumers can't create a sustainable society, citizens can.

Finally, not all pro-sustainability interventions have to explicitly be about sustainability. Appeals to equality and social justice are very likely to invoke a related concern for the environment so it's important not to see sustainability issues in isolation.

We hope that this short publication helps empower those taking action around sustainability to make their action more effective

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### Final Thoughts

Making genuine and lasting political change is never easy but we have the values, vision, policies and dedication of activists. We hope that this short publication helps empower those taking action around sustainability to make their action more effective and joined up. Educating ourselves on how we make genuine and lasting political change is an ongoing process and we'd love to hear your feedback as we continue to develop our thinking – tweet us at [@compassoffice](https://twitter.com/compassoffice) or email us [joe@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:joe@compassonline.org.uk).

# End Notes

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• The planetary boundaries graph can be found at: Rockström, J; Steffen, WL; and 26 others (2009), Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity, Ecology and Society 14 (2): 32

• The link between inequality & sustainability: R Wilkinson & Kate Pickett (2014) A Convenient Truth, Fabian Society, <http://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/A-Convenient-Truth.pdf>

• For more on the inbuilt resistance to change see: Manchester Climate Monthly, November 6th 2013, The arduous transition to low-carbon energy, <http://bit.ly/1gZXstZ>

• For more on the 'green tea coalition' - Eric Brown, Green Tea Coalition Merges Tea Party Politics And Environmentalism, International Business Times, <http://bit.ly/1q9TgNj>

• The tips for systemic campaigning have been adapted from resources developed by Campaign Lab, for more information visit <http://campaignlab.org.uk/>

• For more on Kirkees Warm Zone - C Liddell et al (2011), Kirklees Warm

Zone, University of Ulster, <http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/community/environment/energyconservation/warmzone/ulsterreport.pdf>

Tips for framing was developed from the following:

The Common Cause Handbook at <http://valuesandframes.org/learn/>

Futerra, Sell the Sizzle, <http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Sellthesizzle.pdf>

N Doron et al, 2014, Pride of Place, Fabian Society, <http://www.fabians.org.uk/publications/pride-of-place/>