

UNST 124g fall 2011

What is necessary?

1 introduction

In her short story *The ones who walk away from Omelas*, Ursula LeGuin proposes a definition for happiness that addresses many of our sustainability—or resiliency—challenges:

“Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive.”

In sustainability terms we might see this middle ground as the realm in which society benefits from manipulating its environment without degrading essential ecosystem functions (Rockström *et al.*, 2009). That is, happiness and sustainability rest in a stably constructed human *niche*. LeGuin does not her reader linger for very long in that middle ground before revealing that the benefits of utopian living are not shared as equally as appearances suggest.

Can we see ourselves amongst the people of Omelas? We do remember from time to time that our standard of living comes has not only an environmental cost but a social cost as well. We know about farm workers in Immokalee, Florida and children forced to work in the Indian garment industry (see, for example, <http://ciw-online.org/>, <http://www.productsofslavery.org/>) but we have our own struggles and for the most part we just get on with things. The people of Omelas “would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing that they can do” (LeGuin, p. 230).

Do the distractions of daily life make the child in the darkened room less real? Does the narrator in the story tell you whose law it is that requires the child to suffer? She tells you whose law it is not: it is not the rule of kings, or priests, or secret police, or the corrupt scheme of investment bankers, even. The law is the people’s own. It is through this very specific construction that LeGuin challenges us to think about our own place in a society founded on inequity.

It is important as we direct our attention toward setting and working toward sustainability goals, that we return to the idea of justice and to the framework of *just sustainability* (Ageyman, 2008). Our concern on this front need not be noble. The anti-correlation between environmental quality and social and economic equity is well known—at least in the academic literature, see for example, Ageyman (2008), Schraad-Tischler (2011), and our food audit project last term.

2 social justice

As part of the introduction to your last writing assignment during winter term, *culture* was defined as the integrated pattern of knowledge, values, goals and behaviors that characterize a population group. Those cultural characteristics are expressed in the political institutions, laws, and economic systems around and within which human societies are built. *Justice* considers the relationship of the individual to a society and its systems. The political philosopher John Rawls proposed in *A Theory of Social Justice* that

“Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others.”

Rawls’ statement is secular but theories of social justice have a prominent place in many religious traditions as well. Indeed, the term itself was created by the 19th century Jesuit scholar Luigi Taparelli D’Azeglio in response to his concern that the separation of morality¹ from positive (enacted and enforced) law—a state of affairs promoted by both capitalists and socialists at that time—would lead to chaos.

If we accept this inviolability as ours—without regard to its ultimate source—we must agree upon what it is that cannot be violated. The French Third Republic declared *Liberté, égalité, et fraternité*, while the writers of the United States Declaration of Independence held it to be self-evident that among the unalienable rights of man are *Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*. Twentieth century sociologists are perhaps less inspirational when they itemize six fundamental human needs

- food and shelter
- safety and security
- social support and love
- feeling respected and pride in activities
- mastery (of work and knowledge)
- self-direction and autonomy

but they do have data to support their claim (for example, Tey and Diener, 2011). Research suggests that basic needs and sources of happiness are very similar across diverse cultures.

It is relatively straightforward to evaluate our own individual happiness and well-being. We may even be able to estimate reasonably the status of our peer group or community. As we cast our gaze farther afield the quality of our evaluation likely declines. The people of Omelas could not—some of you argued in class last week—even make a credible evaluation within the confines of their own neighborhood. Even more complicated is the project of comparative

¹The basis for morality, ethics, and related concerns is a weighty topic best left to the experts, that is, to philosophers and scholars of philosophy.

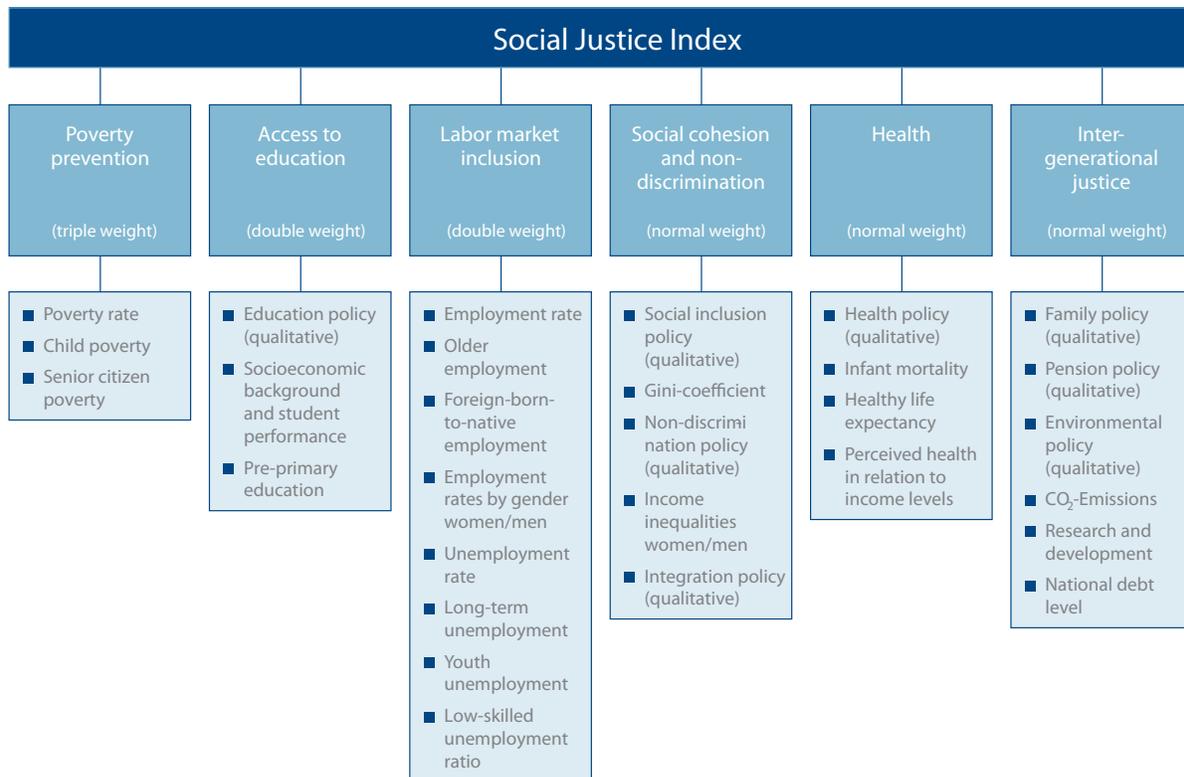


Figure 1: OECD Social Justice Index (OECD, 2011)

well-being and social justice studies. Should our analysis focus on poverty? Access to health care? Access to education? Access to the judicial system? If the answer is all of these, how should the various elements be ranked?

Merkel and Giebler (2009) developed a Social Justice Index, following Rawls' philosophy of justice, that considers poverty prevention, access to education, labor market inclusion, social cohesion and non-discrimination, health and intergenerational justice (Figure 1). These dimensions emphasize governmental policies and societal opportunities that promote the development of individual capabilities and participation in society. It was used by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)² to compare social justice in its member countries (see OECD, 2011).

Examine the different categories represented in the index. Where would Omelas rank in each category? Where do you suppose the United States ranks? Where do you suppose the Penan people of Sarawak rank?

²The OECD is an international organization with its roots in the post-war Marshall Plan, collects data on a wide range of economic and social topics and uses those data to create reports that inform policy on the national and international level.

3 development

In the context of sustainability, *development* is associated with a set of economic and social standards. Last term we used the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI) (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>). It may be worth asking yourself if those metrics might have inherent cultural biases. Might it be the case that cultural norms result in different acceptable standards in different countries? Ability to choose the veil, for example, may be a priority in one country while it is seen as a social ill in another. The French senate recently outlawed face-covering veils for women in a vote that was widely approved by the French people (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/19/battle-for-the-burqa>, accessed 8 April 2011). Should the French have the right to ban some forms of women's attire? If you think different cultural norms should be respected in this way, be careful, the people of Omelas felt the same way about their child. "Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it" (LeGuin (1973), p 230).

4 assignment

Sustainable development and just sustainability (or resiliency, if you prefer) are concepts that hold meaning in every environmental and cultural context. It is not obvious, however, that those meanings are transferable from one context to the next, even if fundamental human needs are universal (Krech, 2005). Yet the ecological and climate challenges we face are global. Is it possible for the Gwich'in to follow their traditions while also allowing the Inupiat what they see as a chance for development? Is it possible for North America's unemployed to find work mining Alberta's tar sands while also allowing the next generation of central Africans to attain their agricultural goals?

The author of one of the two readings with this assignment, Wade Davis, makes a compelling case that we should include cultural diversity in our list of sustainability goals and the *ethnosphere* along with the atmosphere, lithosphere, and other fundamental components of the Earth system. Davis is a cultural anthropologist who has written many popular books about his travels and studies. He has given at least two TED talks that are easy to find using the internet. You may want to recall your readings from fall term as you read the book chapter selected here.

This assignment includes two readings

- Davis, W. (2007). Light at the Edge of the World. *The Last Nomads*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre.
 - Jenkins, Mark. (2011). The Last of the Cave People. *National Geographic*, February. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/02/karawari-cave-people/jenkins-text>
1. Quoting his mentor David Maybury-Lewis, Wade Davis presents an alternate terminology and sensibility about sustainable development in Borneo than the framework of

the governments there. What is it?

2. Davis presents more challenges than solutions in *The Last Nomads* but he does offer some ideas about where the solutions lie. Please explain what they are, using examples from the reading.
3. Do Davis and Jenkins present similar pictures of nomad life? Please provide evidence to support your answer. *This is not necessarily a question with a “yes” or “no” answer.*
4. Do you think Davis and Jenkins have the same view of how modern economic development has affected native peoples in the rainforest? Please provide evidence to support your answer.

5 references

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Rockström, J., and 29 others. (2009). A safe operating space for humanity. *Nature*, 461, 472-475.

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Tey, L. and E. Diener. (2011). Needs and Subjective Well-Being Around the World. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101 (2), 354-365.