

# **Together by the Fire: Rural Living and the Sustainable Development Narrative**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how rural living contains several building blocks for a global narrative about peace and decent competition as necessary social prerequisites for sustainable development. The building blocks are both socio-material (experiencing the camp fire, the nature, the sky, the stars above you) and socio-cultural (storytelling traditions, traditions for perceiving the individual as an actor in history). Our hypothesis asserts that different auditory and visual surroundings create variable environments in relationship to a continuum of what may be termed “narrative friendly”. We link our research to the need for a shared “sustainable development narrative” in which global citizens – rural and urban – can feel at home. Feeling at home within a narrative suggests the narrative offers meaningful interpretations of one’s own lifestyle and position within an ecological landscape. We suggest the symbol of fire (camp fires, fire places, candles, the Olympic fire) as a possible globally shared narrative-friendly symbol that can enhance local narrative traditions and encourage global storytelling. Multiple interpretations and symbolic meanings of fire exist across cultures providing evidence that it serves as a key element between humanity, our belief systems, and provides a much needed social basis for creation of a more sustainable existence.

## **Introduction**

International and national efforts to promote sustainable development cannot succeed without addressing questions of distributive justice (Dobson, 1998) and responsible global citizenship (Dobson, 2003; Haugestad and Wulfhorst, 2004). In this paper we use our different backgrounds, from an American and Norwegian political culture respectively, as discursive resources. Our goal is to point towards unifying narratives about fairness and decency that may serve to unify social groups at international, if not global, levels. In this effort we draw especially on discursive resources from what might be termed “rural living”.

Our interpretation of rural living is related, but not limited to life in non-metropolitan areas where population densities remain lower. To encompass a broader meaning we also introduce the term “narrative living”. The narrative mode of living represents an alternative to the instrumental mode of living – a mode of living that reduces life to cost-benefit calculations and chains of isolated means and ends. The narrative mode of living places cost-benefit calculations within a continuous life story where one’s own life is perceived as interlinked with other’s lives as well as with nature and history. From a narrative point of view one’s actions leave “footprints” in history and every single act is an expression of the role/s one wants to enact in human history.

## **Methods**

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Our empowering narrative approach builds on awareness of the fact that “narrative is ... something we all engage in, artists and non-artists alike. We make narratives many times a day, every day of our lives” (Abbott, 2002, 1). The recent years have witnessed a turn towards biography, narratives and culture in the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Bates et al. 1998; Czarniawska, 2004; Smith, 2000). One common denominator across cultures related to this trend is awareness of the narrative structuring of human existence and experiences. Treating stories about human life and co-existence as constantly under negotiation can help one to grasp some of the complexity of human meaning making and potentials for cultural and social change.

The role of narrative and culture in human life implies that pervasive social change, such as a change from unsustainable to sustainable development paths, requires pervasive cultural change. And pervasive cultural change means pervasive changes in how people use symbols, construct meanings, and make sense of their everyday lives.

In principle, each individual is the author of his or her life story. But being the author of one’s own life story does not necessarily mean that one is the hero or heroine of the story. Empowering social science can take this fact as a starting point and explore how people manufacture the role of heroes in their own life stories. Traditional and modern fairy tales can serve as discursive resources in explorations of possible heroic life stories. Plausible stories are “unconsciously grounded in binary or oppositional structures which work alongside the narrative structures through which a story unfolds in a linear fashion” (Smith, 2000, 52). Empowerment consists of becoming conscious of the binary or oppositional structures in one’s own life story. What kind of structures and oppositions obstruct one from emerging as the hero in one’s own narrative?

We believe that the challenge of sustainability offers heroic roles that might be utilized in the pursuit of alternative patterns of development. If true, we face a potential win-win situation for individuals to become definable heroes within their own lives to compliment more sustainable development paths within the global community. This scenario, however, depends on a translation of the sustainability challenge into practical tasks that individuals and groups can manage. Thus, a need for a *grounded* sustainable development narrative becomes clear in this context.

### **The Sustainable Development Narrative**

The idea of sustainable development as a global approach to peace and prosperity was introduced in the report from the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987) called for alternative definitions of economic growth, encompassing indicators of human development and ecological sustainability. The WCED definition of sustainable development indicates how this new kind of growth can be achieved:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs. (WCED, 1987, 43)

In the years that followed the publication of the report this definition was translated into a three-dimensional concept of economically, ecologically and socially sustainable development. In 1992 the world leaders met for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. A main challenge was to carve out a shared political platform for the pursuit of sustainable development. Such a platform could serve as an overlapping consensus on a strategy to implement the WCED vision as well as a mobilizing device for world leaders confronted with the diverse interests of their respective peoples. However, the world leaders did not succeed in this effort. They did agree upon a declaration of good intentions (The Rio Declaration), two conventions (the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Framework Convention on Climate Change), a Statement of Forest Principles and an action agenda (Agenda 21). In retrospect it seems clear that the failure of the Earth Summit in 1992 to reach consensus on a political platform for sustainable development is due to the lack of ability to overcome political differences that compound a lack of awareness about the immense impact of distributive inequities.

In Rio the world leaders were invited to agree on principles that would necessarily have distributive effects within their respective nations. This followed from the strong commitment to poverty eradication in *Our Common Future*. By agreeing on an action agenda, but not a political platform, the world leaders were able to postpone debates on fair and unfair national and international schemes of cooperation. Even leaders of poor nations might have acted in self-interest because *Our Common Future* challenged the privileged consumption practices of rich consumers of all nationalities. That several national leaders might have had selfish reasons for not being very interested in the distributive aspects of sustainable development did, however, not receive as much attention as the fact that the American president refused to discuss the average American level of consumption:

When representatives of developing nations asked Bush senior to put on the agenda the over-consumption of resources by the developed countries, especially the United States, he said, “the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation.” It was not negotiable, apparently, even if maintaining this lifestyle will lead to the deaths of millions of people subject to increasingly unpredictable weather and the loss of land used by tens of millions more people because of rising ocean levels and local flooding. (Singer, 2002, 2)

In this quote Peter Singer points towards American over-consumption perpetuating a global cultural shift toward practices of continuously unsustainable development. In his book *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* Singer (2002) also points toward a possible solution to this problem, namely a world government:

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are celebrated for the voyages of discovery that proved that the world is round. The eighteenth century saw the first proclamations of universal human rights. The twentieth century’s conquest of space made it possible for a human being to look at our planet from a point not on it, and to see it, literally, as one world. Now the twenty-first century faces the task of developing a suitable form of government for that single world. It is a daunting moral and intellectual challenge, but one we cannot refuse to take up. The future of the world depends on how well we meet it. (Singer, 2002, 200-201)

The suggestion for a world government is a controversial one. In his paper at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Global Conference on Ecological Justice and Global Citizenship in Copenhagen in February 2004 American historian John Cumbler challenged this tendency of American environmentalists to try to solve domestic problems through global governance. Cumbler (2004) claimed that if American over-consumption of certain resources such as fossil fuels is an obstacle to sustainable development, this problem should be addressed to the American polity and solved through the American democracy and not through new supra-national institutions.

Cumbler's argument is consistent with American philosopher John Rawls' recommendations for a Law of Peoples. Rawls expresses confidence in the ability of people who live in just societies to range their preferences and act accordingly:

The Law of Peoples assumes that every society has in its population a sufficient array of human capacities, each in sufficient number so that the society has enough potential human resources to realize just institutions. The final political end of society is to become fully just and stable for the right reasons. Once that end is reached, the Law of Peoples prescribes no further target such as, for example, to raise the standard of living beyond what is necessary to sustain those institutions, or for further reduction of material inequalities among societies. (Rawls, 1999, 119)

By this clarification Rawls disentangles the twin concept "peace and prosperity". Some nations might be satisfied with peace (a just society) and a decent standard of living. Those who want to increase prosperity beyond this stage are in principle free to do so but we will add that they should at the same time be aware of the potentially unsustainable patterns associated with such action and the severe environmental implications if this ideal is universalised. Export of "freedom to consume" as the ultimate democratic freedom carries environmental costs that the exporters of such ideals should take into consideration. Within Rawls' framework this kind of considerations does not justify new supra-national institutions. He expresses faith in the capabilities of decent peoples in just societies to draw reasonable conclusions from situations of resource scarcity. Rawls contrasts his focus on just societies with the cosmopolitan call for a world government to assure global distributive justice:

The ultimate concern of a cosmopolitan view is the well-being of individuals and not the justice of societies. According to that view there is still a question concerning the need for further global distribution, even after each domestic society has achieved internally just institutions. (Rawls, 1999, 119-120)

This quote reinforces George Bush's claim that "the American lifestyle is not up for negotiation". With support in Rawls' Law of Peoples one might say that Americans should be left alone with their definitions of the good life as long as they allow other peoples to develop their own definitions. To this one might object that other peoples are not free to develop their own definitions of the good life as long as American consumerism exists as a global ideal. On many levels, however, this paternalistic objection reveals a lack of faith in people's autonomous abilities to develop their own ideas about what it means to be a global citizen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We believe that *Our Common Future* serves as a sufficient platform to develop a sustainable development narrative about global peace and prosperity that can conquer the consumerist narrative of personal success in individual households all over the globe. In the following we will link this “household channel” to sustainable development in a context of rural and narrative living. With the term “household channel” we refer, firstly, to the family household as the main subject of sustainable development and, secondly, to the household as a metaphor for reasonable schemes of cooperation aimed at individual and group welfare.

### **The Household Channel to Sustainable Development**

In *The Law of Peoples* John Rawls pictures two kinds of “decent” peoples, liberal peoples and other decent peoples (Rawls, 1999). In Rawls’ account the necessary building blocks in societies of liberal peoples are individuals, elected politicians and a just state apparatus that together constitute a liberal democracy. Rawls does, however, acknowledge that democratic organization based on “one man, one vote” is not the only possible road to a just society. To illustrate another possible path he pictures “decent hierarchical societies” that are “associationist” in form: “that is, the members of these societies are viewed in public life as members of different groups, and each group is represented in the legal system by a body in a decent consultation hierarchy” (Rawls, 1999, 64). By opening up for two independent roads to just societies Rawls strongly questions the spread of liberal democracy as a necessary building block of sustainable development. His focus on just structures and basic human rights implies that *good governance* is more important than the structure of a “one man, one vote” system. Rawls does not give up liberal democracy as an ultimate ideal, but he clears out that the transformation from good governance to liberal democracy should be regarded as a domestic matter while deprived peoples’ transformation to good governance should be a matter of international concern.

In Rawls’ account the decent state apparatus seems to be the only main feature that liberal democracies and decent hierarchical societies necessarily have in common. While liberal states express the wishes of *individual citizens*, as expressed through free elections, decent hierarchical states express the preferences of different *societal groups*, as expressed through a consultation hierarchy. The implicit emphasis on citizen rights versus group rights might be taken to express different views on human rights. Human rights can be divided into “first, second and third generation rights. First generation rights include civil and political rights; second generation rights include economic, social and cultural rights, while the third generation rights refer to collective rights” (Baehr and Castermans-Holleman, 2004, 8). When this kind of classification is used the idea is that “the three ‘generations’ exist and be respected simultaneously” (ibid.). A household perspective seems to have potentials to enhance cross-cultural communication on the three “generations” of rights because both “liberal” and “decent hierarchical” states consists of households. Both first, second and third generation human rights aim at strengthening households’ position towards the state apparatus. First generation rights imply a focus on citizen rights as the primary vehicle to empower individuals and households. Third generation rights imply a focus on group rights or collective rights (which are culturally embedded) as the primary vehicle to empower individuals and households. With its implicit shift from the vehicles of empowerment to the subjects of empowerment we believe that the household perspective can serve as a bridge across this interpretative or translatory gap. In addition, rural households across the globe can have a special role in such bridge-building activity.

The last decade has been marked by much focus on the “world citizen” or “global citizen” identities of modern/urban people across the globe (Zachary, 2000; Singer, 2002; Dobson, 2003). With reference to Bart van Steenberghe, Andrew Dobson makes the following distinction between an “earth citizen” and a “world citizen”: “The earth citizen possesses a sense of local and global place, while world citizens make their deracinated way around an undifferentiated globe” (Dobson, 2003, 99). Dobson is writing from within a liberal democracy (UK), and his intellectual project is primarily aimed at facilitating the transformation from potentially irresponsible “world citizenship” to responsible “ecological citizenship” (Dobson, 2003; 2004).

We both write from within liberal democracies, but in this paper we primarily explore possibilities for expansion of grounded rural living into grounded earth citizenship. In this intellectual project, rural households – which from a liberal perspective might seem to constitute obstacles to global solidarity – are perceived as the locales for social bridge-building between different political cultures. Rural households across the globe live with nature’s limits to growth every day. They usually know that the available environmental space can increase if one treats soil and ecosystems with respect and might decrease if one only utilizes the soil and ecosystems for short-term profit without taking the long-term ecosystem needs into consideration. They usually share a “farmer’s sense” of good stewardship (Burton, 2004).

### **Together by the Fire: a Grounded Sustainable Development Narrative**

Do rural surroundings have more narrative-friendly landscapes than urban counterparts? Within rural landscapes, the predominant natural features of the land allow one’s activities to revolve around primarily natural encounters and activities, as opposed to a more human-built environment characteristic of urban places. In rural areas activities such as listening to the birds, fishing for hours, watching and hearing the grass blow in the wind, and lying in the grass and looking at clouds and trees may often be more plentiful and less disturbed opportunities. Different auditory and visual surroundings create variable environments in relationship to a continuum of what may be termed “narrative friendly”. Within this context, fire plays the role of a particularly privileged symbol in developing narrative mental modes across cultures and social contexts.

Multiple interpretations and symbolic meanings of fire exist across cultures (Pyne, 2001). The fireplace is often perceived as the heart of the household, and around the camp fire groups often develop narratives about their place in the universe. Anyone can confirm how looking into a burning flame – be it a candle or a camp fire – places one in a mood where thoughts flow more freely than if one looks at things that can suddenly change in unexpected ways. The fire moves and changes and accompanies the moving thoughts, but within predictable limits. This provides the opportunity and space for one’s own narratives to begin taking shape. One does not just wait for the next change to which one can respond, but instead, becomes the creator of one’s own story. Around the campfire one’s stories are accompanied by paradigmatic stories from the group’s past. Stories individuals may have heard previously become woven into one’s own experiences and one’s own story as well as part of a continuous group history. If one has to leave the group one must weave one’s story alone – or one can join new groups of storytellers.

Under the stars, one’s own life seems small, but not necessarily insignificant. German philosopher Immanuel Kant compared the beauty of the stars above him and

the moral law inside him. One might then ask: What happens to the moral intuitions of children if they cannot see the stars and are obstructed in the development of their own narratives by thousands of competing stories that fight for their attention? This rhetorical question implies a downside for non-rural families that do not provide the opportunities for their children to grow up within, or otherwise experience significant narrative-friendly surroundings. Narrative lives can – and probably should – be created within urban surroundings. One can take the children to the countryside to see the stars. One can light a candle and tell fairy tales. One can sit silently and listen to the sounds of the city – which often resembles the sounds of a waterfall. Symbolically, the more important element is not one's spatial situation but one's mental mood.

Our examples suggest that it is not urban-ness in itself that prevents narrative living. We would rather suggest that the apparent lack of morally relevant urban narratives result from the unsustainable development paths that the industrial world has developed and followed, especially after World War II. This unsustainable development includes instrumental profit seeking, individualized consumerism and brutal competition. It seems difficult to carve out heroic life stories within a political culture that only values individual success. In fact, these cultural trends related to consumerism have changed the predominant forms of narrative to compartmentalized monologues less connected to commonality of meanings and symbols.

If one follows Vladimir Propp's classification model of narratives and folk tales heroism per definition involves a caring role towards other people (Smith, 2000, 54-55). In a cynical political culture (Stivers, 1998) care and heroism are marginalized. Charity can serve as a substitute, but as Mary Douglas remarks, "the recipient does not like the giver, however cheerful he be" (Douglas, 2000, vii). In this situation a grounded sustainable development narrative seems to offer a way out of the deadlock of cynicism and charity. In a household perspective charity remains less relevant. One helps and supports weaker members of the household because it is in the family's interest that all members have sufficient space to grow and flourish.

### **Ecological Footprints and Footprints in History**

On a different scale, climate change is a challenge to the global household. Does that mean that we need a world government that can point out the appropriate way forward? The household perspective suggests that this is not necessary. Family households and national households can all do their best to prevent additional negative climate change. This is in the interest of all members of the global household, and we do not seem to need a world government to tell us that. What we do need, however, are comprehensible narratives about differentiated responsibilities. Members of the global household are asymmetrically affected by global warming and also carry asymmetrical responsibilities. Dobson offers the following account of what it means to be a member in a "closed" global household threatened by climate change:

... many so-called 'natural' disasters may in fact have anthropogenic origins. Climate scientists are fairly confident that, although the disaggregated impacts of global warming are very hard to predict, we are likely to experience an increased incidence of extreme weather events – so called 'strange weather'. When floods devastate large areas of developing countries, we congratulate ourselves for the generous quantities of aid we offer to alleviate the suffering. From the 'closed earth' point of view, though, the campaigning issue is not so much

about how generous aid should be, but whether ‘aid’ is the appropriate category at all. If global warming is principally caused by wealthy countries, and if global warming is at least a part cause of strange weather, then monies should be transferred as a matter of compensatory justice rather than as aid or charity. (Dobson, 2004, 7)

Dobson also suggests that “the most appropriate ‘spatial imaginary’ for ecological citizenship is the ‘ecological footprint’”:

This idea [the ecological footprint] has been developed to illustrate the varying impacts of individuals’ and communities’ social practices on the environment. It is assumed that the earth has a limited productive and waste-absorbing capacity, and a notional and equal ‘land allowance’ – or footprint – is allocated to each person on the planet, given these limits. The footprint size is arrived at by dividing the total land, and its productive capacity, available by the number of people on the planet, and the figure usually arrived at is somewhere between 1.5 and 1.7 hectares. Inevitably, some people have a bigger impact – a bigger footprint – than others (median consumers in ‘advanced industrial countries’ are generally reckoned to occupy about five hectares of ecological space), and this is taken to be unjust, in the sense of a departure from a nominal equality of ecological space. (Dobson, 2004, 11)

Dobson acknowledges that this approach is open to many objections and that the implicit egalitarian view of distributive justice is not unproblematic. However, Dobson nonetheless argues,

... the relevance of the ecological footprint notion to ecological citizenship is broadly unaffected ... unless we believe in a totally cornucopian world in which infinite substitutability of resources is possible. Its relevance is that it contains the key spatial and obligation-generating relationships that give rise to the exercise of specifically citizenly virtues. The *nature* of the obligation is to reduce the occupation of ecological space, where appropriate, and the *source* of this obligation lies in remedying the potential and actual injustice of appropriating an unjust share of such space. ... It also explains and reflects the asymmetrical and non-reciprocal nature of ecological citizenship obligations. Obligations are owed by those in ecological space debt, and these obligations are the corollary of a putative environmental right to an equal share of ecological space for everyone. This is the *production* of the space of political obligation. (Dobson, 2004, 12)

It is quite simple to imagine a global environmental space or global territory where each global citizen places an ecological footprint that is the sum of the resource impact of one’s consumption and other activities. One does not need exact figures to be able to weave one’s own choices into a grounded sustainable development narrative that is about reducing one’s ecological footprint if this footprint is bigger than the global average. By reducing the size of one’s ecological footprint one



simultaneously places a footprint in history: a footprint that bears witness of the quest for sustainable development paths. The average Norwegian ecological footprint is around three times the world average. The average American ecological footprint is around six times the world average. It remains challenging from a social standpoint for individual Norwegian and American households to reduce their footprints to the global average without help from the national household. Infrastructure development and legal reform at the national level must accompany the efforts of family households. Some can do much, while others can hardly do anything. The important thing about the grounded sustainable development narrative is that it can serve as a shared platform for action for households all over the globe.

Rural households all over the globe might easily relate to the grounded sustainable development narrative and become forerunners for sustainable development. The “forerunner” metaphor suggests a connection to sport, which we develop further and link to the Olympic movement and the Olympic fire. In the Olympic and other international sports movements, we see a potential vehicle to bring the grounded sustainable narrative into almost all households on the globe.

### **The Olympic Fire**

In her foreword to *Our Common Future* Chairman of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Gro Harlem Brundtland, writes that “unless we are able to translate our words into a language that can reach the minds and hearts of people young and old, we shall not be able to undertake the extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development” (WCED, 1987, xiv). The language of universal human rights is one possible shared language for young and old global citizens. The sport language of decent competition and fair play is another candidate for the role (Right to Play, 2004). In a recent report from the United Nations these two languages meet. The report explores how sport can be used as a vehicle to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2003). Sports values overlap with the values of sustainable development: Everyone does the best they can and everyone is given opportunities to participate at a level that suits their capabilities. In this way people’s capabilities will gradually improve. Studies of the impact of volunteer programmes on young people’s social responsibility show that sports offers opportunities for both personal growth and the growth of social responsibility (Eley and Kirk, 2002). Sports thus seem to prepare young people for heroic roles in their own lives.

Since 1994 the Winter Olympics and the Summer Olympics have followed different four-year cycles. This means that every second year households around the globe can gather around their TV sets to watch the opening ceremony of the Olympic games and the lighting of the Olympic fire. Every second year the world gets a new opportunity to unite around the message that the Olympic fire contains: During the Olympic games all other conflicts shall rest so that the peaceful competition of the athletes is not disturbed.

Translated to the grounded sustainable development narrative, the fire symbolizes the state in which conflicts must rest so that we can build a sustainable future together. One might in fact ask if we need any other human rights than the right to play. If we manage to create a global community where all adults and children can play and flourish this must necessarily be a socially sustainable global community. If in addition they adjust their play and flourishing to the earth’s ecological limits they will be living in an entirely sustainable global community.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the often forgotten fourth pillar of sustainable development, culture (cf. WCCD, 1995). The current world situation shows that there is an urgent need for a shared global political culture based on trust and mutual respect. A frightful alternative is a security narrative which enhances “more exclusion, preemptive strikes, retaliation, more violence, more terrorism, war” (Pronk, 2004, 31).

When a shared global political culture is lacking, different national, subnational or transnational political cultures will tend to universalize their own conceptions of freedom, equality and brotherhood. The world might then experience what seems to be an unavoidable “clash of civilization” while it should rather be perceived as a “clash of definitions” which can be avoided through cross-cultural dialogue. In his refutation of Samuel Huntington’s idea of a clash of civilizations, Edward Said speaks about “the kind of benign globalism already to be found, for instance, in the environmental movement, in scientific cooperation, in the universal concern for human rights, in concepts of global thought that stress community and sharing over racial, gender, or class dominance” (Said, 2002, 590).

Providing narrative nurturing to the seeds of benign globalism has been the aim of this paper. We have added the sports movement to the picture and we suggest that the sports movement can serve as a bridge between rural and urban approaches to sustainable development. By linking the grounded sustainable development narrative to children and adults’ right to play and the peace message of the Olympic fire we have tried to translate the sustainability challenge into an easily comprehensible metaphor about fair play and decent competition in a peaceful and ecologically sustainable global neighbourhood.

Our approach represents a shift from focus on distributive justice to distributive injustice. People from different political cultures might never be able to agree upon definitions of distributive justice. With a little help from the Olympic spirit they might, however, agree that if some people are not able to play because other people’s play occupy their environmental, economic, social and/or cultural space, we have a situation of distributive injustice in need of change.

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