



“Summary of article by Neva R. Goodwin: Introduction to the Global Commons” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 323-325

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

### **“Summary of article by Neva R. Goodwin: Introduction to the Global Commons”<sup>1</sup>**

Since Garrett Hardin's Tragedy of the Commons appeared in 1968, the metaphor of the “commons” has been applied in a wide range of contexts. Today we think of natural resources that we feel do or should belong to the entire human race as the "global commons." The global commons includes the earth's atmosphere, its oceans, frozen poles, and forests, and the entire genetic reserve. Humankind did not make these biophysical structures but inherited them, and they may be referred to as the "global natural commons." The global natural commons are increasingly threatened by human action that is based on self-interest. To help counter these problems within the natural commons, we should turn to the "global human commons" for solutions.

The global human commons refers to behaviors and motivations tending toward "cooperation and sharing in the interest of pan-human, or even biosphere-wide, welfare"(2) The global human commons can be observed in institutions built and shared by all humans, including the world's universities, the different branches of the United Nations, non-governmental organizations such as Oxfam America and the International Red Cross, and international financial organizations like the World Bank and the IMF. The global human commons also includes international treaties for the benefit of all humankind, such as the Law of the Sea, the Montreal Protocol and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The role of the global human commons is to regulate access to the global natural commons in such a manner as to minimize conflicts between nations and interest groups, to increase equity of access among different groups, and to ensure sustainable resource use so as to balance the needs and wishes of present and future generations.

The issue of goals or intentions is central to the question of what entities are considered part of the global human commons; their main intention should be to serve pan-human welfare. These organizations belong to the "third sector"; they are designed to serve needs for which neither national governments nor the profit-oriented business sector are sufficient. Different people have different views about what constitutes the common good, and these views change over time. The third sector offers the best hope for providing a constant reassessment of what the common good is, in the context of a variety of often competing interests.

In the individualistic Anglo-Saxon tradition, national governments are viewed as institutions needed to solve problems arising out of market failures - e.g., public goods, free rider problems and externalities. However, some problems that exhibit characteristics of market failures transcend national jurisdictions and are of global concern, such as environmental problems, the spread and effects of science, technology and research, military conflicts, diseases and their

cures, human rights, etc. National governments, markets, or a combination of both cannot solve these problems. The global human commons, working through the third sector, must transcend national interests in seeking solutions that serve the good of all of humankind in such cases. Whether the third sector works with or against governments will depend on whether both share a common ethic about what is right and assume the responsibility to follow through. Trust and responsibility are important if globalism is to succeed. The third sector needs to earn the trust of all concerned through acting in a responsible manner for the welfare of the whole of mankind. A "civic corps" comprised of volunteers working in a spirit of *pro bono publico* towards global goals must form the basis of the third sector.

What are the prospects for the significant development of the third sector in the future? A number of contemporary trends and processes give reason for optimism. First, the world is quickly coming to understand the economic and ecological interdependence between all people and nations, and it is recognizing the need for international institutions and regulations in the light of this interdependence. Secondly, communications technology is fostering a shared global culture and a commitment to solve global problems. Third, as affluence becomes more widespread the meaning of work is being redefined. In the past, when people worked to pay for the necessities of life, work was meaningful by definition. A number of factors, including increased affluence and the welfare state, have weakened this nexus between work and providing the necessities for survival, contributing to a new spirit of redirecting work for the welfare of humankind.

Increasing global problems necessitate giving some institutions overarching powers to undertake long term global planning. This planning could help coordinate and regulate a number of factors that are critical to human and ecosystem welfare. With the fall of the planned economies of Eastern Europe, there is skepticism about planning at the global level. It is important to emphasize, however, that there are different approaches to planning. Rather than the inhumane central planning experienced in Eastern Europe, the search must begin to put into place "decentralized, bottom-up, democratic, pluralistic planning."

"The promotion of 'global thinking,' as the final flowering of 'civic virtue,' may be seen as continuing, through education, the historical civilizing process: of expanding the way we define and understand our 'self-interest.'"(12)

## Notes

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1. This article is an introductory article to a special volume of the journal World Development focusing on global issues that may require response on a global scale. Parts of this paper that discuss the origins of this special issue and the other articles appearing in it have been omitted from the summary.