Generating Youth Action for Sustainable Societies

Scott Werts

Sustainability is an incredibly broad term and likely invokes a variety of thoughts when applied to societies. When discussing a sustainable society, are talking about sustaining our food supply? Our natural resources? Our way of living? Our economy? All of these? I feel that if we were to ask different people, we would likely get different answers. It is also likely that the subjects and visions for sustainable societies in the series of essays associated with this workshop vary quite a bit. Society itself is a large, complex system with many working parts.

 When we teach about sustainable societies, in general, we seem to be speaking about keeping what you have and maintaining your lifestyle. But by the same token, we have this underlying drive to improve our lives and the lives of our neighbors. Even people living comfortable lives would love bigger houses, newer cars, better computers, more convenient foods, just to name a few things. We, as individuals, do not want to maintain the status quo. We want an upward trajectory for our own livelihood. I think that it is here that the term “sustainable society” gets confused. How does an improved lifestyle for the individual become sustainable for the society as a whole?

 As educators, I feel that we have the ability to explain that having a sustainable society; one where we do not quickly deplete natural resources, where water usage is actively managed and controlled, whereas little food is wasted as possible, where urban centers can generate their own energy; can result in a better lifestyle for people individually. A sustainable society for the collective can result in more resource security for the individual in that respect.

 I recall messages geared toward preserving our environment on television and in the classroom as a child. Today with my own kids I feel that the message has gotten out even better than before. There are entire tv shows dedicated to sustainability and environmental stewardship. Environmental science courses and clubs are the norm in larger high schools. We even see it on packaging of the very products we buy. In our first world society I think we all know it is important. I feel that we all also know that moving toward achieving a sustainable society requires investment upfront for a return later. Installing solar panels on buildings is a significant expense that will likely take over a decade to pay itself off. Becoming a zero-waste school requires investment in composting systems and personnel to handle the food waste system. The poorest of areas are not able to put forth these kinds of investments.

 The fundamental question then is how we, as educators, can help drive action on a small scale in these poor areas and also push for a large-scale investment on city and state levels. We can certainly talk about it, demonstrate how change could work and benefit everyone, and detail some of the successes of others in the past. We have been doing this and have had demonstrated successes. Another way to approach this is to support a new generation of youth leaders to make this change. Maybe incorporate environmental action into fundraisers such as a scrap metal recycling drive for high school sports teams. Perhaps a school that moved to a zero-food waste system could begin selling compost as fundraisers. Or community gardens at a school or run by youth programs that can sell their products at farmers markets. On a smaller scale, this could serve as springboard for the poorest of areas. On larger scale, perhaps student led groups can drive a campaign to have their campus invest in sustainable design for any new buildings or retrofitting old ones with renewable power. As educators, perhaps we can not only teach students about the latest innovation or ideas regarding sustainability, but also how to best manage their capabilities to bring the change to their doorstep.

 I am a geologist/soil scientist person by training. During this workshop, I hope to be able to learn from participants from other backgrounds regarding their ideas of supporting sustainable societies. I hope to be able to about ideas for educating students and developing educational resources to promote sustainability. Most importantly, I think, I hope to hear how others have inspired action and concrete advances in moving toward a sustainable society and forge partnerships to push for action.