

Proposal For:

Post 2015 – UN Consultation on Environmental Sustainability

I. RECOMMENDED TOPIC AND ACTIONS

A Global Commons Based Approach to Sustainable Development

We urge the United Nations to adopt a “commons approach” at all levels of government and throughout society to achieve MDG 7. Such a Commons Based Approach would focus on environmental sustainability; link economic, social and environmental sustainability; address cross cutting issues; honor the Rio Principles and Declaration; and thus be included as a Topic of Discussion in this consultation.

Core Ecological Principles of the Commons Approach

A commons is a community of independent interests that prosper together by collaboration, like people with different talents making a business thrive or species occupying different niches making an ecology thrive. The responsiveness of each interest to others, whether intentionally in a thriving nation or co-op, or naturally as in a culture or economy, is what creates “the whole far greater than the sum of the parts”.

A commons approach would steer the new development goals to create communities of self-interest that collaborate and work-together to create environmental, along with social and economic, sustainability.

Innovative methods can be used to facilitate and motivate collaboration between diverse groups of stakeholders, so they can combine their talents and solve their own problems, with much less “rule making” and much more listening to each other and to the science.

Global commons-based solutions exist wherever groups or networks of people produce, manage or steward natural or social resources in an inclusive, democratic manner for the benefit of all stakeholders without harming other people or nature. Commons resources can be natural, social or cultural resources that are produced or managed collectively because of their intrinsic importance to the thriving of all stakeholders--those most motivated to restore and sustain them.

As the UNDG Thematic Paper on Environmental Sustainability states, “the international community has not committed the necessary investments to achieve MDG7 while the ecosystem’s capacity to sustain human development is increasingly compromised.” It is for

these reasons that the following actions, supporting a Commons Approach to Environmental Sustainability and a Green Economy, are urgently needed:

A) Global Public Goods, ranging from watersheds and forests to the atmosphere and oceans must be protected and restored for the well-being of humanity and nature using a commons approach from local to global levels. To protect natural resources local stakeholders need a say in the use of local resources. Comprehensive Sustainability Reporting and Economic Liability Assessments (ELA) should be used to assess and factor in the economic costs of business practices to our common future.

B) Major Groups, which function like a commons within the UN, should be fully and actively included in all UN decision making processes and their role in the new High Level Forum on Sustainable Development strengthened, returning to the level that it was earlier in the CSD process.

C) A commons approach would embrace Green Tax Policies which are urgently needed to get the incentives right for transitioning to a green economy; help us protect and restore the natural environment; and equitably share the profits from the management and use of commons resources among all people; and help us fund and achieve all the multi-national goals and agreements made to date.

From the local to the global level we can shift taxes off of labor and productive capital and onto land and natural resource rents. Thus, municipalities can collect the surface land rents within their jurisdiction. Regional governing bodies the resource rents from forest lands, mineral, oil and water resources. And a Global Resource Agency should be established to collect user fees on such transnational commons as satellite geostationary orbits, minerals mined or fish caught in international waters, and the electromagnetic spectrum, etc.

D) The Sustainable Development Goals, Targets and Indicators need to be human centered, scientifically based, comprehensive in scope, focus on making a complete transition to full sustainability, and measure aspects that may not be immediately visible in order to fully implement MDG 7.

E) All Local and National Sustainability Strategies; the Action Plans and the 10 YFPs on Sustainable Consumption and Production should be intergrated with the efforts developed under the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development and be based on a Commons Approach thus including all stakeholders in development, management and implementation.

F) A commons approach is needed to implement Rio Principle 10 and adopt the Access Initiative; significantly more funds are needed to include civil society as a primary actor in implementation; and rather than halving poverty all people's basic human rights and needs should be fully met.

G) Our global atmosphere is one of the largest commons on the planet. Under a proposal for a Feasta Sky Trust emissions permits could be used to provide a right to use of the atmosphere. Current schemes like the Emissions Trading System (ETS) assume the carbon scarcity rent

should go to polluters or governments – but really it should be used to provide for the well-being of all of humanity instead. See: www.feasta.org

H) UN General Assembly resolution 64/292 of 28 July 2010 "*recognizes the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights.*" We therefore suggest that:

- it is imperative that water sources, springs, head waters and aquifers be held in common by those cultivating and protecting them;
- we connect water quality to industry, access, and land stewardship to ensure that all water is kept clean and available; and
- the same status be urgently accorded to all other commons goods as well, without which people cannot survive and thrive.

2. RATIONALE

Commons communities bring people together to discuss, negotiate, design and implement solutions to their mutual economic or communication problems, such as managing, stewarding, and producing resources democratically so that all stakeholders benefit. Commoners thus take personal care and responsibility for their natural and social resources, which are then typically much better managed and sustained.

Commons are ubiquitous. Their value has been stressed by Elinor Ostrom who won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences. They include intentional commons like Wikipedia, Geocities, Ecovillages, Transitions Towns, cooperatives, the business arm of the commons, Indigenous Communities, open source software, and the multi-stakeholder resource partnerships that came from the environmental movement.

Natural commons and human commons follow many of the same principles: interdependence and equivalence of the individual parts fostering collective creativity in relation to one another and the whole.

Environmental sustainability is essential to human wellness and material welfare. A collective sense of responsibility toward the commons as a viable means to end warring over these life giving basics can eradicate poverty, realize a collective global peace and unleash the creative potential of a mature human species.

UN sponsorship of both the study of commons and implementation of the principles of commoning can give it a new major role in creating an environment where the collective will and creative potential of world citizens as commoners is utilized to address global problems at the local to global level. In 2025, the majority of voters globally will be 25 and under. A change is already underway at the grassroots level and the great turning is being fueled by young people already wired to act as a commons, preferring cooperative models in housing, work, food, social interactions, etc.

The people are not waiting for governments to resolve their challenges. However the UN's leadership is crucially important and a commons approach is an ample framework during a time in which collective creativity and decision making are urgently needed.

3. EXISTING FINDINGS

Adopting a global Commons Based Approach to environmental sustainability would build on much that is already in place: One billion people are registered members of cooperatives -- businesses that use a commons approach. Cooperatives are often thriving during these times of economic downturn where the traditional global economy is failing.

The Danish agricultural sector; Norwegian Pension Fund; Alaskan Permanent Fund; and the Raffeisen and other Banks and credit unions, insurance companies, HMOs in the USA, farmers markets and forest management in Nepal use commons approaches.

In 2008, Ecuador incorporated the rights of nature in their new constitution. Rather than treating nature as property, these laws affirm that nature has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles. And the citizens have the legal authority to enforce these rights and protect these commons resources. Electricity revenues also pay for watershed management; and in Colombia taxes on petroleum and charcoal support activities of the National Environmental System.

Ethiopia and Barbuda have thousands of small agricultural commons or village clusters. They help to increase market products and food production and are lifting rural people out of abject poverty.

Many Hawaiian communities still rely on the ancient Ahupua'a system, an early sustainable model of permaculture. Each community holds an interest in the natural resources and gives its people access to all sources of food production. Their interests are held in common and the bounty shared by the stakeholders.

With a commons approach natural and other resources are collectively managed so they benefit all people and are sustained in a healthy manner. Water resources can thus be priced to sustain the resource while ensuring they equitably benefit and are easily available to all people. Taxes collected on overuse of this resource can be used to ensure full access by all.

Similarly, 90% of waste water flows back into the watershed untreated in the developed world. Many examples show how we can collectively manage water and wastes using biological methods; clean up our water bodies; and use waste resources in a circular manner providing much needed nutrients for agriculture.

In addition with green tax policies we can raise the revenues needed to invest in infrastructure development. This will enable us to reach a target that is not to halve the proportion without but to ensure that all people have access to the basic services that are mandated under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, HR Conventions, Rio Principles and UN Charter.

While a basic minimum of resources needs to be available if a commons community is to succeed, even the 370 million Indigenous People, many of whom live in marginalized

conditions, have much to teach us about how the governance structures of commons can work well.

In addition a Commons Abundance Network (CAN) is being set up to help commons communities and networks learn from one another and form stronger unity in diversity. CAN has the potential to enable a commons-based economy to form bottom up and top down, will encourage natural alliances to form, and support the development of public/private/civil society partnerships.

4. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- A. Why do we persist in maintaining the inequities that lead to the degradation of the environment and the destruction of life?
- B. How does a commons approach promote environmental sustainability, restore our right relationship with the earth and others; and how can it be embraced and shared with the world?
- C. How widespread are commons and what types of commons exist? How can they help us achieve all of the new Sustainable Development Goals?

PLEASE SEE THE ATTACHMENTS FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES,
RATIONALE, AND QUESTIONS

ENDORISING ORGANIZATIONS

12/28

- All Win Network
- Institute for Planetary Synthesis (IPS)
- Commons Action for the UN
- UN major groups Commons Cluster
- Earth Rights Institute

12/29

- Climate Change Network, Nigeria,
- Kosmos Associates
- ECOJURE
- Eco Foundation for Sustainable Alternatives (EFSA), India
- CAFSO-WRAG for Development

- Campaign 2015 and International Campaign 2015
- Civil Society Coalition on Migration and Development
- Women's Rights Action Group
- Maria Ebum Foundation
- Planning Alternatives for Change, LLC.

12/31

- Uganda Environmental Education Foundation (UEEF)
- Association of World Citizens

Authoring Team: Rob Wheeler; Myra Jackson, Jesse Henshaw, Lisinka Ulatowska

Contact: lisinka.ulatowska@gmail.com