

The Sustainability Scam: How Self-Interest Ruins Good Ideas



11-09-2024 ~ *We must ensure ecocentric standards to reverse environmental and social injustices.*

We have laws to ensure children are born into a safe, sustainable, and unpolluted environment. These laws are also meant to [empower](#) future generations and guarantee birth equity. But far from ensuring that these rights are upheld, we disfranchise children at birth because they do not have a legal say in the actions of adults that impact their future.

Our ill-advised desire to [prioritize economic growth over children's futures has led to the climate crisis](#). It has also led to children being born into unequal conditions where they do not have equal access to welfare resources. This has resulted in the impacts of environmental degradation being felt unequally among different socioeconomic groups. Poor people, Indigenous groups, and people of color are, by and large, impacted more by the degraded environment than the wealthy and white segment of the population. This is the tragic legacy of environmental racism, which has been referred to as "[the new Jim Crow](#)."

Those most affected by these injustices often have little or no say in shaping policies and laws, and their children eventually inherit this unequal system. In a capitalist, profit-driven economy, it is unsurprising that the corporate sector, driven by financial concerns above all else, is the biggest culprit in perpetuating these wrongs—particularly the [extractive industries](#) and [industrial agriculture](#).

The Misinformed Power Grab

Most leaders—and the biggest beneficiaries of an unequal society—never came close to protecting children from the harm caused by the development model favored by the rich world. Instead, poor children grow up in a world to face the repercussions of a [power grab](#) by wealthy, primarily white, families.

The first misstep of dissociating the connection between human rights and environmental sustainability was taken in 1948 when the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) was signed, establishing fundamental rights for all people.

Twenty years later, in 1968, the [United Nations held a conference in Tehran](#) where some groups raised concerns about the impact of population growth (and, by extension, economic growth) on human rights. Despite these efforts, the concerns were never resolved, and the relevant changes were never incorporated into the UDHR.

Fixing the Problem: Laws, Norms, and Reparations

The UN's ill-informed, misguided policy decision has led to a socioeconomic system built on the disenfranchisement of children at the time of their birth. There is an urgent requirement to rectify this situation and secure their welfare.

Firstly, reparations are needed. The wealth made through this process of disenfranchisement must be used to secure the future of newborn children who are entering the world. Those wealthy individuals and corporations that have benefited most from this disenfranchisement (and may have promoted ignorance by glossing over the [actual impacts of economic growth](#)) should be held especially responsible.

Secondly, we must establish laws and norms that ensure that the rights and welfare of unborn children are accounted for in the democratic process and that human beings are not merely seen as a means to sustain and grow economies. We must shape a future where children are not born simply to become consumers or workers but as fully participatory citizens with agency over their lives, with the ability to choose and thrive instead of merely surviving.

While [Effective Altruism](#) and other movements based on financial investments are often viewed by many nonprofits as effective ways to resolve these issues, [reparations are the most effective and immediate](#) way to fix problems facing us today if we want to restore the natural balance. If we skip this crucial step, it would be the equivalent of building a house with no foundation.

The Sustainability Scam

Sustainability has become a buzzword among environmentalists, CEOs, and politicians. Leaders often present themselves as guardians of a better future, bragging about eco-friendly projects and sustainable methods. However, a closer

look exposes a darker aspect to these assertions. The rhetoric and reality frequently diverge significantly, with racial disparities, self-interest, and uneven growth undermining various projects' ostensible benefits.

Nonprofits working toward social, economic, and environmental changes must also include family planning in their goals. They must first help ensure the shared, inclusive equity of children born into the world. That means giving all newly born human beings an equal capacity to self-determine the social and ecological influences that others have over them.

In his 2018 book [*Winners Take All, The Elite Charade of Changing the World*](#), Anand Giridharadas examines how the global elite's efforts to "change the world" are only an attempt to retain the status quo. He argues that their actions to try and resolve problems are a bid to hide their role in creating the problems in the first place. Publishers Weekly [called](#) the book a "damning portrait of contemporary American philanthropy."

But Giridharadas—and publications like the [New York Times](#)—have missed the biggest charade—the one mainly driving the suffering and death unfolding as temperatures increase. This "sustainability scam" has at least two standards for activist campaigns that claim to be sustainable, green, humane, democratic, eco-friendly, etc. There is one standard for wealthy investors (and their children), who often fund organizations that promote these terms, hoping that their work might have an impact in furthering them, and a different standard based on birth equity.

These standards are artificial, arbitrary, and designed to allow a particular form of economic growth that benefits some—mainly the white population—at a deadly cost to others. This first standard—anthropocentric and [adopted in 1968](#) by the UN agencies bowing to wealthy families—does not require birth equity. It functions on unsustainable welfare as the primary currency or value.

This first standard allows significant deviation from the ecosocial baselines and ecocentric standards that would have [prevented the climate crisis](#). These real standards can be measured along [at least eight metrics](#) like restorative levels of greenhouse gas emissions and inclusive representative ratios that ensure a healthy, functional democracy. Deviation from these standards—based on self-determination or freedom and equitable share in democracy—has led to the [climate crisis that is killing millions](#).

Funders in the polluter nations facing significant climate liability fund various institutions—media, nonprofits, universities, agencies, think tanks, and celebrities—to spread disinformation to support the first standard. This allows wealthy families to treat inherited wealth and other privileges as something outside the realm of the democratic process, which they use to strengthen their positionality and growth to systematically disenfranchise the average voter. We are now at a place where they can use the wealth they made through the scam to attack the democratic process and try to step outside of it.

An [effort is underway at the United Nations](#) that requires assessments of climate damages. This includes the need to 1) ensure that ecocentric standards are adopted to account for the actual harm being done by the crisis and 2) to treat these standards and the recovery of climate reparations as the first and overriding human rights, a right that preempts the government's authority to assign wealth contrary to it, and allows citizens to engage in preemptive acts of self-defense to protect themselves and their children.

Inequitable Growth Policies

As a fundamental right, people who are made vulnerable by the actions of others—like [fenceline communities put in harm's way](#) by petrochemical plants being built in their backyards—are owed compensation. As [millions die in a climate crisis](#) resulting from inequitable growth policies undoing most mitigation efforts, questions arise about how that happened and who should be held accountable.

We can see the imbalance in how the climate crisis disproportionately impacts those who are least responsible for causing it. In 2022, Seth Borenstein and Drew Costley of the Associated Press [reported](#) that “the data shows that the top carbon emitter over time, the United States, has caused more than \$1.9 trillion in climate damage to other countries from 1990 to 2014, including \$310 billion in damage to Brazil, \$257 billion in damage to India, \$124 billion to Indonesia, \$104 billion to Venezuela and \$74 billion to Nigeria. But at the same time, the United States' carbon pollution has benefited the U.S. by more than \$183 billion, while Canada, Germany, and Russia have profited even more from American emissions.”

This problem can no longer be ignored if we want to secure our children's future. We must work toward [resolving](#) the social and economic disparities, increasing access to welfare measures, and ensuring better resources for pregnant women

and families.

Ensuring Child Rights

There is a [minimum threshold of well-being for birthing a child](#), which is necessary for self-determination. We must take drastic measures to ensure all children have the resources to become self-determining individuals. This could involve seizing resources from well-defended enclaves of wealth. By doing so, potential mothers might be incentivized to plan for their children's future, knowing these resources would be available.

Some will argue that reduced economic growth, for example, is too high a cost to pay for ensuring birth equity and access to the same welfare opportunities for all children, especially those from BIPOC communities. However, these minimum thresholds are essential in forming a just and equitable society. People who argue against these basic standards threaten who we aspire to be as a society. They are more interested in exploiting humans and the environment for their gains, rather than investing in a better future. They [threaten our freedom](#).

It's physically impossible to have a legally obligating "we" that precedes all legitimate national constitutions without measurable birth equity. As the work done by the United Nations shows, no one gets to use authority and state violence to benefit at a cost to others [without incurring significant risk](#). It is important to see beyond the lies perpetuated [between 1948 and 1968](#) to make us think that national sovereignty is magically inherent. It has to be derived from the measurable sovereignty or self-determination of its subjects.

The only way to ensure share equity is to entitle would-be parents to bring children into the world only after a certain threshold of planned conditions, measurable on the eight metrics, have been achieved. The wealth accumulated by exploiting nature, which led to the climate crisis, must be used to ensure these conditions.

The United States prides itself on being a free nation but uses the concept of freedom that starts by exploiting the most vulnerable. There is no [minimum threshold of well-being](#) for future children and animals, as they are [seen as a means](#) to growing economies rather than individuals with rights who form integral parts of society.

Converting democracies into unsustainable growth economies that enrich a few

by diluting everyone else's equal and influential equity shares in our political system is a subtle form of oppression. It leads to [millions dying as the growth triggers catastrophic heat waves](#). This eventually results in justified resistance movements to protest against the scam, where those at the top of the economic pyramid benefitted from a society that promised an inclusive democracy, which is instead based on shared inequity.

"While there is no 'optimal' human population, the evidence suggests that a sustainable global population of 3 billion is an optimistic number given that we long ago entered a continuously intensifying state of ecological overshoot, accumulating ever more massive amounts of ecological debt that must be paid down if we are to avoid the ongoing (and ever-worsening) climate catastrophe, ecological destruction, and the resulting human misery," Dr. Christopher K. Tucker, chairman of the American Geographical Society, said in an October 2024 email.

"Adding 80 million additional people to the planet each year—the equivalent of 10 New York Cities or an additional Germany each year—is not a recipe for addressing this polycrisis," he said. "Fortunately, simply investing (heavily) in empowering strategies focused on women and girls worldwide can hasten the already inevitable demographic transition that would relieve the unrelenting pressure we have foisted on our planet—and help us meet our commitments to the next generation under the UN's 1959 [Declaration of the Rights of the Child](#)."

The wealthy need to pay the cost of creating an unequal system that benefits them instead of ensuring equal and inclusive participation by all citizens in that system. They profit from treating children as part of a labor force [to build and grow economies](#), instead of securing their rights as part of human rights and the democratic process.

Many involved in prioritizing birth equity have seen a pattern in how they react to it: they do not offer counterarguments to the idea that [restoring nature through ecosocial birth equity](#) must be the first and overriding human right but resort to tactics to evade the issue.

These people share a common trait: They attempt to evade being held responsible for the deadly costs and lush benefits of their birth, developmental, and emancipatory positionality. Their phrasing varies from "I'm just trying to save

these specific animals” to “I’m just trying to focus on this specific area of research.” That kind of siloed myopia ultimately [destroys](#) biodiversity and causes irreversible environmental damage.

True Sustainability Means Having Children in a Very Different Way

These deceptive tactics undermine the promise of sustainability, allowing leaders to project a false image of environmental stewardship while continuing harmful practices. To achieve genuine sustainability, we must demand transparency, hold organizations accountable, and ensure that the benefits of sustainable development are [distributed equitably](#). Addressing these systemic issues is the only way toward a sustainable and just future.

Many willing to benefit at a deadly cost to others want to treat the birth of children as unrelated to their lives. It is not. It is the basis of all things: a commitment to our most fundamental aspirations. Do we care about each other or exploit each other? While economics has dominated the social sciences because humans predictably try to maximize their welfare, it is also clear that many people choose criteria for truth and value that reaffirm their birth and developmental positionality.

That’s a dangerous form of self-deception, but understanding its existence allows us to move beyond economics, beyond capitalism versus socialism, and toward unifying constitutionality. We can’t change lives for the better if disproportionately influential people have the power to define what good is. Recognizing this fact is essential to hold those who evade our [obligations to birth equity](#) accountable—so that we all can work together to know what’s right and work toward taking remedial steps to prevent further environmental damage.

How could you know how much welfare you deserve if you are not involved in making the rules determining welfare? We can’t create economic demand by violating neonatal rights. We can’t ensure economic growth by preventing all citizens from being born and raised in town halls and participating in the democratic process. Using [specific ecosocial thresholds](#) to reform birth and development rights ensures an equal and influential role in rulemaking, thus limiting the influence others have over you to live in relative self-determination. Given the [exponential difference](#) between the wealth of Black and white children, massive reforms are necessary to achieve equity.

Countries cannot legitimately undercut the sovereignty of their subjects by ignoring children’s birth and development entitlements, using those children instead as economic inputs to create ecologically deadly growth. Nations and many powerful interests within them have, while responding to the “baby bust” of falling fertility rates, openly admitted to doing this. Part of creating deadly growth is to offer [tax cuts to women for having children](#).

In the book [Walden](#) by Henry David Thoreau, we learn that a basket weaver could not expect to [succeed in the “free” markets](#) created by those colonizing his lands. But even Thoreau missed the fundamental value of nature in constituting the creation of power relations toward equity and freedom. Laws that protect the beneficiaries of any political system only derive their legitimacy by [including and empowering future generations—in a measurable way](#)—rather than exploiting them.

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