The Moral Imperative for Sustainable Communities

by Randall Reid

In February 2008, several dozen International City/County Management Association (ICMA) members, staff and academics joined together in Phoenix to discuss the need for ICMA's membership to embrace the concept of sustainability. It was a rewarding weekend of examining survey data from members, hearing about environmental problems and exploring community needs around the world. Most meaningful perhaps were the shared stories of the critical importance that local communities have played in our lives.

Our discussion recognized the need to develop a broader understanding of sustainability and how ICMA members can assist their communities to become more sustainable. We noted that the revolution of sustainability would be serious work, requiring both a renewal of the profession's civic reform idealism and an individual commitment from each member to embrace sustainability as a professional management practice.

A commitment pledge for ICMA members modeled after the final lines of the Athenian Oath to "transmit this city greater than it was transmitted to us" was developed for members to sign at the 2007 conference in Pittsburgh.

Committee members began to encourage state associations to include sustainability sessions at their conferences. We also circulated a series of sustainability articles similar to the *Federalist Papers*, reflecting the basic concepts and core practices of sustainable communities.

The purpose of these efforts is to create a dialogue in the profession on "the issue of the age." This first *PM* article examines the roots of sustainable communities in the American cultural experience, as well as the spiritual and ethical foundations for sustainable governance.

A Sustainable "City on a Hill"

The precepts of sustainability that link people, place and prosperity are not foreign to America's national DNA. Across America's vast landscapes, indigenous Indian tribes, such as the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, were well versed in sustainable practices and governance, living close to the land and exercising participatory democracy. The Confederacy's Great Law contained the seventh generation sustainable ethic, "In every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation."

In 1630 on a ship off Massachusetts, John Winthrop established a vision of an America as a "City on a Hill" to be built as a shining example to the

world. Recognizing the challenges of the land to be settled, Winthrop sought a divine "blessing in the land" and declared "therefore let us choose life that we and our seed may live." Thus, prior to political formation of local government, a sustainable vision uniting people, place and prosperity was rooted in American soil.

The Founding Fathers were familiar with both the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman philosophers. They knew the Old Testament warning in the book of Proverbs that "without vision the people perish" and Aristotle's observation that people come "to the city to enjoy the good life."

Such historical documents of the republic as Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," speech, and John Kennedy's inauguration speech are a living stream of civic and spiritual expressions. They each represent a collective desire for sustainable and just governance, a focus on higher national purpose, and a call to sacrifice for the future.

Transcendentalist philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau; conservationists such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold; and writers such as Wallace Stegner, John McPhee, Wendell Berry, Robert Frost and Garrison Keillor have contributed to what has been an American dialogue on our sense of place and community. Our various regional cultures are reflected in music, architecture and literature that arose in local communities.

Historically, wise local government managers are quick to learn the uniqueness of their community's local histories and cultures when new to town. We must now also understand the unique complexities of the bioregion and ecological environments in which our communities exist.

The Preamble to the Constitution called for "We the people" to unite and establish a democratic society. Yet government was not alone responsible for this effort then or now. As de Tocqueville pointed out so vividly, the early civic associations of the United States – the original nonprofit sector – developed independent of governments.

Citizens have collaborated to better the human condition in American communities since our earliest days. Today's sustainable communities will require new and increased levels of civic engagement and participation of citizens as joint partners with our local governments.

Today, citizens must be coaxed off the sidelines and encouraged to be more than customers. We must recognize that "community" begins in conversations between strangers. As managers, we can convene and facilitate such conversations on creating alternative futures for our communities.

ICMA members from other cultures and countries have a similarly rich foundational heritage and traditional stories from their own indigenous peoples that promote the notion of a concern for the environment, healthy economy and social justice as being necessary for a prosperous human experience. Just as we share many of the same beliefs about sustainability, it is clear that our shared economic, social and environmental futures are more interdependent than ever before in our history.

Secure and Resilient Communities

It is no longer reasonable to deny that climate change is affecting our natural systems, weather and migration patterns around the world. Resource depletion, such as potable fresh water, is increasingly documented as population and urbanization increase.

The past year has seen natural gas distribution disrupted in Europe due to regional politics, water shortages in Atlanta that led to Supreme Court litigation from Florida and Alabama, and fluctuating fuel prices and a collapse of our global financial system. Commercially grown tomatoes, lettuce and peanut butter have been withdrawn from markets because of fears of contamination, resulting – at least in my jurisdiction – in a renewed interest in community gardening and local organic food supplies.

Globalization of our economy does not change the fact that we conduct trade at a local level and must ulti-mately provide our communities with a sustainable supply of food, energy and water. The localities where we live actually become more important in periods of economic collapse, spiking energy prices, or food and fuel supply disruption. The ICMA's membership cannot plan to control world events, but its members can and should plan to be more sustainable and resilient to external threats.

Sustainable communities require the practice of sustainable governance. Sustainability is foremost an ethical framework for daily decisions to be aligned with a shared long-term community vision for stability. These are communities whose consumption of resources and production of wastes are sustainable over time and don't diminish the prospects of future generations.

Sustainable governance is a process in which all community sectors and individuals willingly collaborate to create respect for people and place. It is more organic, conversational, collaborative, appropriately scaled and decentralized than existing practices. Hopefully, it will be more compassionate as well.

Sustainable solutions do not have to be of a particular political ideology but do require funding and resources. Alachua County recently installed a solar collector system that assists in providing electrical power for the county's solid waste resource recovery station.

Our newest solar array of panels could be viewed by some in the community as an environmental project, while others would see it from the perspective of energy independence and national security. They are both correct: future sustainable communities will politically slant neither left nor right. To paraphrase the old management saying, "There is not a Republican or Democratic way of installing solar panels."

Sustainable governance and solutions will require managers to focus more on ecological principles and system theory to achieve more synergistic solutions for the complex problems we face. A neighborhood program to promote energy conservation and reduce utility bills for low-income homeowners, for example, meets multiple sustainable goals.

The program reduces carbon emissions and our community's carbon footprint. It increases energy efficiency and reduces poverty and health issues among homeowners struggling to afford food, health care and rising energy costs. Volunteers, disadvantaged citizens, at-risk youths and civic organizations can be trained to weatherize homes, thus providing jobs and volunteer opportunities that strengthen civic involvement. Sustainability requires these kinds of synergistic solutions, and in the end, both the environment and the citizens benefit.

Sustainable communities need the performance management skills of ICMA members to focus on the metrics of changing community conditions. Three decades ago, in 1979, Laurence Rutter stated in ICMA's "New Worlds of Service" report that "demography is destiny." These demographic trends are already impacting natural resources, housing, health care, education, criminal activities, urbanization and immigration. Sustainable communities driven by demographic changes will require locally distinctive approaches to problem solving.

Local natural resources and fiscal and social capital vary between communities, as do locally appropriate solutions and technologies. Alternative energy sources, for example, may include solar or wind farms in wide-open expanses and nuclear, hydroelectric and geothermal elsewhere. Community visioning, data-driven strategic planning, smarter land-use patterns, expanded civic-engagement techniques, collaborative decision-making processes, and performance monitoring of key community indicators must be employed by our members to implement more sustainable alternative futures.

Finally, managers must recognize that regionalism may be the governance process and form of structure of the future. The region and not the local government may become increasingly more important in dealing with issues of sustainability that take place within bioregional systems.

This may continue to require new forms of regional governance, forums and collaboration as natural systems disregard political geography. Bioregional scale interlocal agreements will be needed to protect resources and reduce the pending potential of legal or political conflicts over resource competition.

For American managers, many who have spent decades valuing the principle of home rule and local self-government, this may be a bitter pill to swallow. Florida has faced this issue over the future of the Everglades restoration, where engineered structures are being removed, communities may be eliminated, and major industries acquired to re-establish water flows required by the ecological systems.

Moral Imperative of Sustainability

Managers and residents may tend to mistakenly label sustainability as being just about concern for the environment. Environmental concerns are indeed of paramount importance because history shows us that civilizations that abuse their environments do not prosper in the long term. But sustainable communities place a major priority on creating sustainable economies, poverty reduction and involvement of all segments of our communities.

The rise of new industrial power centers in countries such as Brazil, India and China has intensified competition for resources as these countries and others seek American-style consumption levels. The interdependence of a global economy means this will inevitably impact your community.

We have often been shielded from the impact of resource distribution and are blessed by better governance and resources than many areas of the world. Will that always be the case if we continue to ignore the moral imperative of creating more sustainable communities? Are we willing to take that chance as a profession?

Above all else, one cannot understand the practice of sustainable management or sustainable communities if one does not see our discussion of sustainability as an ethical statement on civic virtue, healthy living and social justice. Sustainability is about the responsibilities we have to each other as humans and the places we hold dear.

How we use natural resources and the levels of our consumption will affect our future security as a local and global community.

Sustainability as the "Golden Rule" Applied

Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, sought to create a more sustainable community by housing the poor through the "Theology of the Hammer." This theory embraced wholeheartedly the idea that the love of God and the love of man can be blended and integrated in the humble act of constructing a house.

The practice of sustainability among ICMA members can be a holistic ethical lens focused on our collective behaviors; similar to the ICMA Code of Ethics that governs our professional behaviors. Any religious or spiritual component of our lives is usually separated from our professional conversations.

If we could admit professionally, however, that love of people and place are both a human and a professional response and solution to community ills, it might mean everything in terms of embracing sustainability. Many managers possess a strong spiritual sense that our profession of managing communities and organizations can be best understood in the concept of stewardship.

As Cincinnati community consultant Peter Block says, this brings an uplifting moral and life-affirming "gift" and "commitment" that we bring to our communities through our acts of public service. In this sense, we do righteous work.

The spiritual aspect of this sustainable stewardship is important because unbridled greed and competition for depleted resources has historically lead to conflict or violence. In 1993, the Parliament of the World's Religions convened in Chicago. Some 8,000 people from all over the world came together to see if they could find a common ethic in their religious traditions with which to address the issue of violence in their communities.

After much dialogue, they came up with the Golden Rule: Do unto others

as you would have them do unto you. As the chart below indicates, it is a common ethic among ICMA members of faith worldwide.

As Australian author David Andrews relates in his book, *Plan Be*, "The great value of the Golden Rule is that it is acceptable not only to the religious but also to secular people. General reciprocity seems to be 'common to ethical systems everywhere.'"

The principal strength of the Golden Rule is that everybody might agree that it is a great place to start with understanding the fundamentals of sustainability…"to do unto future generations as you would have them do unto you." Under the concept of applied sustainable ethics, it is no more right for me to use the resources of future generations or another region, for example, than it would be for them to take mine from me by political or military force.

Simply because a resource such as water is available in greater quantities or more cheaply outside my own region would not make it ethically right to acquire such resources without consent or fair payment. Self-discipline and community restraint of sprawl and resource use are regional and environmental virtues.

Applying the reciprocity of the Golden Rule to our fellow citizens, we would seek to give others economic opportunity, education and health care that we have enjoyed because we would want such advantages for our own families and ourselves. This principle of reciprocity is fundamental to the concept of sustainable ethics, and clearly scalable and transferable from personal to local to national and international context.

In the context of sustainable management, a chief executive's role is to create a positive and healthy work environment where employees can grow, develop and excel. Employees as people cannot be viewed as an expendable commodity and resource.

In these times of cutbacks, it is important that we seek sustainable solutions to sizing our organizations in alignment with our diminishing fiscal resources and our organizational values. An example would be such human resource policies as furloughs, job sharing and reduced workweeks to avoid the number of layoffs.

Our own local government organizations can be considered as communities where employees spend the bulk of

The Golden Rule:
A Relevant Foundation for Sustainable Communities.

Hinduism
Never do to others what would pain you.
Panchatantra 3.104

Buddhism
Hurt not others with that which hurts yourself.
Udana 5.18

Zoroastrianism
Do not to others what is not well for oneself.
Shayast-na-shayast 13.29

Jainism
One who neglects existence disregards their own existence.
Mahavira

Confucianism
Do not impose on others what you do not yourself desire.
Analects 12.2

Taoism
Regard your neighbor's loss or gain as your own loss or gain.
Tai Shang Kan Ying Pien

Baha'I
Desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.
Baha'Ullah 66

Judaism
What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor.
Talmud, Shabbat, 31a

Christianity
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
Matthew 7.12

Islam
Do unto all people as you would they should do to you.
Mishkat-el-Masabih

Sikhism
Treat others as you would be treated yourself.
Adi Granth

Source: "The Need to Be the Change," *http://wecan.be.*

their lives and waking hours. Sustainable governance of local organizations will enhance the dignity of employees, seek to encourage collaboration and teamwork, share information, promote transparency, conserve natural resources, and reduce or reuse waste materials.

Conclusion

A sustainable community is all about enhancing the "Three Es" of economy, environment and social equity within the community to improve people's lives. This requires a visionary eye, with the present and future well-being of the whole community as its goal. The success of our daily actions, however mundane or heroic, can be judged by the sustainability of the communities and organizations we design and manage for the benefit of current citizens and future generations.

As Martin Luther King reminded people, the daily struggles of the Montgomery bus boycotts themselves were not the end being sought: "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is creation of the beloved community."

Educating residents about sustainability is important. When speaking to them, it may be good to refer to sustainability as being about local people, local places and local prosperity. To bankers, speak about living off the interest not the principal. To farmers, speak about not eating your seed corn. To the elderly, speak about their grandchildren. To veterans, speak about our nation's security. To scout groups, speak about leaving your campsite better than you found it. As ICMA managers, I urge you to simply speak out.

Perhaps we make sustainability too hard a concept or principle to grasp. What if sustainability were as simple as the Golden Rule! Imagine treating people and your neighboring jurisdictions as you would want to be treated.

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