

“Beyond Today’s Capitalism: Moving to True Sustainability”
April 23, 2009, Economic and Social Council Chamber,
United Nations Headquarters NY

On Thursday, April 23 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and NGO Sustainability co-sponsored a talk with Dean James Gustave Speth entitled “Beyond Today’s Capitalism: Moving to True Sustainability” held in the Economic and Social Council Chamber at United Nations Headquarters. Ms. Roma Stibravy, Chairperson of NGO Sustainability opened the meeting by explaining that we hold these events to promote the work of the UN family in sustainability and to heighten awareness about the different aspects of sustainable development and renewable energy. Ms. Stibravy mentioned that we had just celebrated Earth Day and that this year there seemed to be more media and newspaper attention than at any time since 1970 - perhaps a good omen in our efforts to preserve Planet Earth. Ms. Stibravy then introduced our host, Mr. Olav Kjørven, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Bureau for Development Policy at UNDP. In his career path Mr. Kjørven served as the State Secretary for International Development in Norway among other positions. Mr. Kjørven said Dean Speth has been tirelessly committed to addressing the world’s environmental problems and is a “pillar of the environmental and global community.” Mr. Kjørven said that while at UNDP, Dean Speth strengthened the organization’s approach by encouraging the movements for social justice and human rights to work more closely with the international movement for environmental sustainability. He described this as the intersection of the environment and human development.

Dean Speth is currently Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. His previous jobs include: former Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, founder and president of the World Resources Institute, Chairman of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality, and cofounder of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The lecture covered the main points of Dean Speth’s latest book which has just come out in paperback, *The Bridge at the End of the World: Capitalism, the Environment and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*. Dean Speth began his presentation by explaining that while his book was intended for an American audience it is also relevant for citizens from other rich, developed countries. He stated that these nations need to move to a post-growth society and must reinvent their current economies in order to preserve the environment. He believes the current economic crisis has created an opportune time to act. Dean Speth outlined the paradox that the environmental movement has been active for almost forty years and yet in that time the environment has continued to be abused and destroyed. To take just a few examples: we have lost half of the world’s tropical and temperate forests; seventy-five percent of the ocean’s fisheries are fished to capacity or over-fished; and we are losing species at one thousand times the natural rate. Dean Speth explained that while the U.S. is certainly not the only country harming the environment, our nation is complicit and has “contributed enormously to the international

depletion.” In this regard it is important to note that the U.S. has not even come close to meeting the Clean Air and Water Acts of the 1970s. Dean Speth stated bluntly that if we keep treating the planet as we have for the last forty years, it will not be fit for our children and grandchildren.

Dean Speth explained that the rich nations of the world have the largest harmful impact on the environment and these nations also almost exclusively have capitalist economies. It is these prosperous nations which consume the vast resources of the planet, occupy the majority of land and discharge the most harmful and destructive chemicals. The size of the world economy has quadrupled since 1960 and it could easily quadruple again by the middle of this century. The environmental movement simply cannot compete with this enormous push for growth. This disturbing reality led Dean Speth to the central question of his book: how can we change the operating instructions for the world economy? His conclusion: we need to move away from a capitalist system. Capitalism and environmental protectionism are intrinsically at odds because capitalism promotes growth and growth ultimately harms the environment. The main problem is that the capitalist economy does not take into account the environmental costs of doing business. The result is a world economy that undermines the ability of our planet to sustain life.

The biggest mistake which environmental activists have made, Dean Speth explained, was to work within the current system by pursuing legislative action and reform and attempting to raise public awareness. While not completely futile, these attempts are simply not enough to bring about fundamental change; the solution is to change the entire system. By this Dean Speth was referring to changes that will create a more equitable society. He explained the link between social inequality and environmental degradation: people who are struggling to survive simply cannot afford to live in an environmentally friendly manner. In this way the movements for social justice and the environment are directly linked.

Dean Speth believes that to save the environment we must have environmentally honest prices of consumer goods; we must look at the basic laws which govern corporations and move away from maximizing profits at all costs; and we must address the runaway consumerism and obsession with growth that has taken hold in many nations around the world. Dean Speth explained that in many cases we are better off environmentally because of slower economic growth and declining returns. The extra costs to the environment that come with growth are often larger than the benefits. Dean Speth’s solution is a post-growth society, one in which the conditions of employment, the public sector, and community prosperity do not come at the cost of growth. He believes that the following things should be implemented in order to slow growth and increase public welfare: more leisure time and a shorter work week; better employment benefits; environmental provisions in trade agreements; a more progressive taxation policy; and increased spending in the public sector and on education.

The question remains: *will the current economic crisis open the door for changing both the economy and American societal values about materialism?* Dean

Speth believes this could happen, however, we first need new environmental politics in the U.S. and we must challenge the rampant *consumerism* that has taken hold. We also must remember that environmentalists cannot do this alone, they must align themselves with other social movements and work towards inclusive solutions. This fusion of people working towards social justice coupled with the government taking a more active role may pave the way to ensure environmental sustainability.

The question and answer session began with a question regarding whether it is realistic to claim that the U.S. could move to a post-consumer society. Dean Speth said that he has seen encouraging signs of people in the U.S. moving away from consumerism. He then pointed to the example of Japan in the 1990s when slow growth resulted in a sense of anti-consumerism; he said this too could happen in the U.S. Dean Speth believes there could soon be a moment when our leaders can articulate a new dream for the U.S., one in which materialism is not central. However, this moment will only come if society itself drives the change, there must be a widespread movement on the scale of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s fight for civil rights.

Another attendee asked Dean Speth if he believes we must change the international institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, etc. Dean Speth began by saying there is much that the UN could do to strengthen itself, such as reorganizing the Economic and Social Council. Moreover, there should be a more powerful international body to deal with environmental issues such as a World Environment Organization encompassing the UNEP, etc. A question was raised by an attendee who read an article claiming there is a Kuznets curve which proves that countries will only begin paying attention to environmental factors when they reach a certain state of development in their economy, i.e. they become rich. Dean Speth explained that while that might be true on a micro scale it will certainly never be true for an entire country's economy. For this reason we must act now to prevent further environmental damage by the prosperous capitalist economies in which so many of us live.