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# Review of Resolving Environmental Conflict: Towards Sustainable Community Development

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# BOOK REVIEW: RESOLVING ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT: TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, BY CHRIS MASER

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*Resolving Environmental Conflict: Towards Sustainable Community Development* by Chris Maser. Delray Beach, FL: St. Lucie Press, 1996, 200 pp., $39.95, paper [ISBN: 1–57444–007–1].

The need for protecting environmental quality is increasingly apparent to many Americans. Inner-city residents are acutely aware of industry's pollution legacy and of the outflow of resources that perpetuates environmental degradation. Residents at the fringe of metropolitan areas mourn the loss of woods and meadows and ever-increasing traffic congestion. Many are troubled by the persistent loss of the nation's natural resources and threats to the improved air and water quality enjoyed in the last few decades.

The tensions between the need for economic viability, quality of life for residents and ecological quality are manifest at the local or community level. Local governments strive to bring jobs and economic resources into their communities, but in many instances have traded environmental quality in the process. The ensuing conflicts have often been bitter, and harm the well-being and identity of the community. Ultimately, all suffer or benefit together from the way such conflicts are resolved. How can communities deal with environmental conflicts in ways that preserve ecosystem function and economic viability while strengthening the social ties that bind to ensure that community endures? In *Resolving Environmental Conflict: Towards Sustainable Community Development*, Chris Maser, an ecologist and facilitator, describes a facilitation process for moving communities toward a vision of environmental/social sustainability that will address all three of these concerns. Maser's book targets professional facilitators, but his insights and lessons are relevant to anyone involved in an environmental dispute or interested in coming together to plan for a community's future.

As Maser notes, the intricate social and scientific issues of most community environmental disputes cannot be adequately addressed without expanding the participants' perception and knowledge. This can occur as part of a process that moves participants beyond the particular conflict of the day toward sustained community participation in decision making. Maser emphasizes that potentially community-rending conflicts will recur until a community can agree on a shared economical, ecological, and social vision. To help communities in that endeavor, he proposes to combine self-reflection, social reflection, democratic principles, and ecological awareness into a transformative facilitation process.

After a thoughtful preface that lays out his purpose and some definitions, Maser presents his method in two parts. In Part I he describes his experiences and insights as a facilitator, guiding the reader through the facilitation process. Maser's method leads people to become aware of the long-term effects of their decisions, particularly on children and future generations and on the land and its productive capacity, the silent parties in all environmental conflicts. In Part II Maser describes the goal of facilitation—sustainable community development. Facilitation should move citizens toward community development within a sustainable landscape, achieved not by striking a "balance" between economy and environment, but by finding "synergy" between social and natural systems.

Chapters 1 through 9 present a detailed account of transformative facilitation with practical guidelines. Maser describes the process stage, its purpose, and its philosophical basis (from either an ecological or social perspective), and offers suggestions about the role and actions of the facilitator. Chapter 1 reviews two major approaches to facilitation, problem-solving and transformative. The latter, which Maser practices, involves moving beyond the mutually acceptable agreements of the problem-solving approach. It seeks to catalyze a change in the consciousness of participants, offering them an opportunity to grow as moral citizens. The facilitator is to "help parties empower themselves" to define the issues and reach agreements through a process whereby they "recognize and capitalize on the opportunities for personal growth inherently present in conflict."

Eliciting such change in participants is fundamentally tied to Maser's notion of social and ecological community sustainability, because the root of destructive practices both in the natural world and toward others is fear of the unknown, perceived as a threat to individual survival. This fear drives individuals toward material accumulation as they strive to eliminate risk. From such perceptions are born the willingness to denigrate others and to exploit nature without regard for the inherent order and value of natural systems in order to find material "security." The present-day incompatibility of human material desires fueled by our fears with the sustainable capacity of the environment leads to destructive environmental conflicts.

Maser asserts that unless these deep-seated fears are addressed, communities will have little chance for resolving environmental disputes in ways that move them toward economic and ecological sustainability. To overcome these fears, Maser guides participants through a three-part process that orients them toward systems thinking stressing the interactive, interconnected, interdependent nature of ecological and social systems and their integration across past, present, and future times.

During the facilitation, participants learn about the ecosystem within which their conflict occurs. Maser often takes the participants on a field trip to experience first-hand the significance of the ecosystem. Participants tell their story of the conflict to the facilitator, who encourages them to orient their thinking toward the future. Each participant or group is asked to generate a vision, goals, and objectives and present these to the larger group. Participants are continually asked to

examine their values and perceptions about the dispute and their community. The facilitator helps identify areas of overlap, or common ground, from which they build a shared vision for their community and a set of goals for moving forward. Participants retrace the important elements of the dispute resolution process and identify their next steps: to refine their vision and goals, set objectives, and implement them through a plan for sustainable community development. Once these are accomplished, Maser considers the conflict resolved. The process usually takes three to five days, if not longer.

Chapter 2 addresses the importance of choice in creating and settling disputes and asks participants "what do we owe future generations?" Maser posits that ethical treatment of ourselves and of future inhabitants requires us to act in ways that maintain future options, or the ability of future generations to choose their destinies, as we hope to choose our own. The ability to choose one's destiny is considered the basis of equality and environmental justice.

In Chapter 3, Maser describes the ecological principles he uses to inform participants about ecological systems during facilitations. He stresses interconnections, interdependencies, and interactions, and the need to increase participants' understanding of ecological variables—air, soil, water, biodiversity, human population, sunlight, and climate—as they are changed by human actions. Maser strives to communicate that nature is governed by impartial laws which we do not fully understand, and that change is the dynamic constant. Understanding this may lead to changes both in the way participants value the resources and in their willingness to exploit the resource fully in the face of incomplete knowledge of the effects of such exploitation.

In Chapter 4 Maser cautions the facilitator to always keep the participants' personalities in mind. The wise facilitator identifies as fully as possible the behavioral traits (the need for avoiding change, for example) or coping mechanisms (denial, aggression, defensiveness, projection, rationalization, repression, or acting the victim) of participants as these affect their position during the process. To ignore these traits stemming from family experience inhibits the facilitator's ability to bring the participants to personal change and growth.

In Chapters 5 and 6 Maser offers counsel about communication and responsibility. It is the facilitator's task to create a safe place in which common bonds among participants can be built, maintained, and strengthened through good communication. The facilitator must define technical terms clearly and precisely so all parties understand them, and must ensure that all parties have equal access to information. Maser's emphasis on this facilitator task is particularly important, I think, for conflicts where citizens may not have a scientific background, but may have valuable knowledge to contribute to the process.

In Chapter 6, Maser reminds facilitators to always be clear to themselves and to their parties, and that the responsibility for resolution of the conflict lies with the parties, not the facilitator. The facilitator's job is to foster faith in the process itself, not get a settlement, and to teach participants skills to go through a consensus-building process again if another conflict arises. The facilitator's task is to help the

parties reframe their negative perceptions and expectations into positive statements about their vision for their community and its resources. Such reframing is based on structuring the process as a learning partnership among the participants, described in Chapter 7. The facilitator acts as a teacher as well as leader.

In Chapter 8, Maser describes transformative facilitation and its relationship to democratic government. Common to both is the need for people to listen to one another's ideas as different and valid experiences in a collective reality. Democracy only works when practiced, when people are connected by their participation in solving problems and charting the future of their own communities. Democracy, like participation in a transformative facilitation process, requires reflection, "balancing and integrating contrasting perceptions of data, fact and truth . . . in such a way that the rifts between opposites can be minimized and healed" (p. 133).

In today's world it becomes increasingly difficult to have a shared experience to make decisions together. As Maser argues in Chapter 9, the global community is in transition, robbing people of a sense of place and substituting some vague idea of location. Yet, in order to resolve conflict, participants need to establish a shared vision, common goals, and objectives. And in order to establish a vision and goals in common, people need to be clear about who they are. At this stage of the process, Maser asks participants to answer: who are you as a people, in a cultural sense? What do you want your children to have as a legacy of your decisions? What do you want your community and its supporting ecosystem to look like and be like as it is developed economically? By answering these questions participants craft a positive vision of a shared future for their community. A strong, shared vision can be the most powerful motivation for community members working together because it is both an intellectual and emotional bond built on the sense of place and spiritual connections that people have for their community and its ecosystems. If the participants can articulate (orally and in writing) a common vision for the future of their community that incorporates environmental/social sustainability, the facilitation process ends as a success.

In Part II, Maser describes how the transformative facilitation process can be used by a community to plan how to achieve its vision. In Chapter 10 he proposes what sustainable development would entail as a process of directed change and social evolution: a shift to non-linear, systems thinking; to economic and social development guided by the principles of social and environmental justice—for all living things, not just for humans; to intergenerational equity and the responsibility of the current generation to its own members and descendants; and, to the specification of which resources and ecological systems are to be sustained. Sustainable community development has to be based on a unified world view incorporating notions of synergy, interconnectedness, process, ecological integrity, carrying capacity, social and intergenerational equity, and democratic decision making. The decision process through which sustainable development works must flow within,

and promote, a democratic frame of reference because democracy works only when actually practiced—at the community level.

Chapter 11 describes the special relationships between local community development and sustainability. A community molds the local landscape within which it rests and in turn is molded by it. Maser asserts that in America, family and community disintegration means that few people have an intimate sense of belonging. If adopted, a vision of sustainable community development can create and recreate a sense of local community by enhancing local culture over time, strengthening local economy and self-sufficiency and increasing self-determination of the community's future path. Adoption and implementation of sustainable community development requires participation in governance by community people, not waiting for administrators to act to improve community. Implementation of sustainable development requires a careful process of grasping a vision, setting goals, planning how to achieve them, monitoring the results, and reflecting on the progress. Maser sees a strong role for local government in this process, that of setting a good example. Local government oriented to sustainable community development would find effective, productive, and inventive ways to bring citizens into the process of governing. It would break down bureaucratic barriers, buy recycled goods, provide day care, and encourage car pooling. It would find ways to increase local adaptability in its planning and management to meet needs locally and in the most ecologically sound ways. It would design its community in relation to landscape so that community and landscape become engaged in a mutual, self-reinforcing feedback loop. How a community treats its surrounding landscape determines the future choices remaining open.

I recommend this book for its carefully reasoned purpose in joining transformative human growth with notions of sustainable community development. It would be useful in an academic setting, for professional facilitators and for community members seeking an alternative process for decision making. The author presents many helpful examples from his many facilitation experiences to illustrate concepts and techniques. As with other models of facilitation, Maser relies heavily on the power of information. He goes beyond to rely on the ability of participants to reflect. A skillful facilitator would be needed to make sure that such reliance strengthens the process. Despite the book's general readability and insights, I was left wondering how anyone but a very experienced facilitator could use this method because of demanding that the facilitator carryout multiple tasks.

I agree with the author that this transformative approach has great potential in settings of community development and planning because of the high likelihood for engendering new ideas and motivating people toward sustainability. One concern remains here as well. The process as described seems to place facilitation exclusively in contexts where the participants have decision making authority. I wonder how well the process works when the results are subject to external veto, as is common in community planning or among advisory bodies. It seems to me that participants would then be reluctant to engage in such an intense process of self-examination unless fairly certain their decisions would be taken seriously.

The procedural aspects of the method—the importance of responsibility, communication, faith in process, etc.—are in many ways similar to the more common problem-solving facilitation. What is different about transformation facilitation? It is its search for change in moral character and its purposeful modeling of the small-scale, community-level democratic process. The value of Maser's book is that it pushes those of us who believe conflict resolution processes have value to make connections to the broader issues of governance and ethics. Transformative facilitation is asking of the facilitator what Barber (1984) and Benhabib (1985) have asked of democratic participation by citizens or what Forester (1992) expects from mediators in public sector disputes: an opportunity for enhancing democratic participation, not just problem solving. It posits an alternative model of governance—that of participatory democracy by citizens of moral character. In this light, the problem-solving model asks no more from participants than does the pluralist political model—bargaining to achieve the middle ground, which is not dependent on fundamental change or a shared vision among the participants. Maser proposes that to be better environmental citizens we need to be better environmentalists, but also better citizens, and we need to take moral responsibility for future generations, preserving the options they will have for maintaining environmental quality.

Two other related concerns remain. The systems approach Maser used to frame information and the thinking of participants is appealing to those of us involved in ecology or environmental affairs. The danger when the model is applied to human systems, however, is that it cannot well address issues of power. Maser offers little or no discussion of the reality of power differences in communities, or of the social conflict inherent in the exploitation of resources. He argues that destruction of nature is a product of bad choices and misperceptions. Others would argue that it is a result of an unending onslaught of global capitalism in one manifestation or another. For example, how well would the transformative model address the power of U.S. chemical companies to shape human health in the Great Lakes basin? The problem-solving approach doesn't necessarily address the issue either, but recent conflict resolution literature has devoted some attention to these broader issues of power differences. This attention is lacking in Maser's description of process and in his description of sustainable development.

The realities of power differences also surface when considering the role of local government and its leadership in sustainability. Some local governments in the United States are taking the lead, but often local administrations are captured by local industrial or real estate interests. In my experience, local government is often the most resistant to changes in perception. Local government officials are at times guided by the (mis)perception that economic viability requires sacrificing environmental quality. And, when convinced that sustainability is the appropriate guide for community development, they will undoubtedly reach a social limit to their plans—the threat of litigation by land owners. A transformative facilitation process used in the context of community planning would have to be backed by the legal authority for communities to implement its outcomes.

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