

Sustainable prosperity for all?

Sustainable prosperity must involve equal respect for everyone, Priscilla Alderson argues in her guest blog, including traditionally excluded groups.

by PRISCILLA ALDERSON



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Equally distributed prosperity depends on equal respect for all. Women's legal right to own property was not recognised in Britain until 1882 when, slowly, women began to be recognised as real people and were no longer dismissed as unreliable dependents. From the 1960s onwards, the campaign for women's rights was advanced by two useful words. First, 'sexism' succinctly identified the root of the problem of discrimination against women. It transferred the blame for women's inferior status, and their seeming lower ability and intelligence when compared with men, away from women themselves and onto powerful social structures of prejudice. Gradually these sexist structures are being identified and dismantled, and women have growing opportunities to show that they can be at least equal to men. The second useful word, 'feminism', turned what might have been a weak negative term about disadvantaged inferior women into the name for a powerful positive movement. Similar words linked to former weakness and shame have been transformed into slogans of strength and triumph, such as Black Pride and Gay Pride to fight racism and homophobia.

However, a third of the people in the world are still ignored or excluded from many economics, politics and social justice agendas. This third involves more than half the people in Uganda, where the median age is 15 years. Work on transnational solidarity for social justice and prosperity needs to consider everyone aged <19 years, besides intergenerational justice between older richer nations and younger poorer ones.

Children have no such clearly agreed concepts as sexism and feminism to advance their status. Instead, within endemic adultism, 'grown-up' is a compliment and 'childish' is an insult. Ageist prejudices correlate virtue, understanding, ability and rationality with age. It can then seem

normal, natural and moral that adults should control supposedly volatile irresponsible children. Like sexism, adultism works in self-fulfilling prophecies by setting unjustly high barriers and low expectations for children's involvement in activities and relationships, increasing children's likely failures and attributing these to their incompetence and their need to be subordinate.

Ashley, aged 9, expressed the passionate concern of many children with ecology and justice: "You feel like you're getting heard and everyone in the world knows - cause you're shouting so loud and you're putting your heart towards something" (1:155). Young people's challenging engagement has been shown in the witty posters that [school students have carried through streets around the world](#) this year, reminding us that we older generations cannot be trusted with the prosperity of the people or the planet. Sustainable prosperity for all (2) depends on all generations listening to and working with each other respectfully.

Concern for 'future generations' may be abstract, disconnected from today, and perhaps peopled by phantom adult figures. Concern for younger generations, however, can connect past and present to the future, today's realities and problem-solving to tomorrow's alternatives and possibilities over children's potential lifetimes. Sustainability combines enduring continuities with constantly recreating, emerging, incremental, transformative change. (1-6) Younger generations reveal these processes in many ways. Each baby embodies continuity and transformation; humanity's past and future depend on new birth and childhoods of learning, transferring and transforming our social heritage through each child's creative imagination. (7)

In their vulnerability, children starkly expose the dangers of economic injustice and climate change, with the urgent need for sustainable prosperity and peace. In high-risk areas, during floods or droughts that may lead to forced migration and armed conflict, young children suffer far more than adults do from heat, thirst, hunger, exposure, infections, gunshot wounds and polluted air and water. These dangers may end their lives or leave them with lifelong disabilities. Migrating young children may be lost, stolen or trafficked, with little hope of ever reuniting with their families (5, Chapter 9). On the other hand, during and after disasters "by helping others, children are able to contribute to their own recovery, as well as the recovery of those around them. Children, like adults, need to regain a sense of control in the face of environmental threats, and chronic and acute disasters. One of the best ways they can do this is through being actively engaged in the places where they live, go to school, work, and play." (8)

Since World War II, as prosperity in the form of welfare states developed, funds began to flow into new services for children. For example, medical and nursing services rapidly expanded, supported by costly clinical research and training. Countless children who would formerly have been left to die now survive and flourish. However, in recent years, vast austerity programmes and policy changes, such as those in the USA under cover of commercial confidentiality being copied in the UK, are privatising and reducing services for patients who cannot afford private insurance (9). This too often affects children and disadvantaged parents. The risk of returning to pre-welfare state deprivations and gross inequalities is growing fast. (5, Chapter 10).

To understand and successfully challenge these destructive policies, we need to see how neoliberalism and neo-colonialism reconfigure childhood and especially harm the youngest generations. Like canaries in coalmines, they can warn us of growing dangers. As wealth moves up the age-range (most billionaires are >60 years), austerity, debt, poverty and precarious housing and income pervade the lives of young people and young families. When profit is the priority, schools are led to treat children as worthwhile investments or as cost-burdens to be policed, punished and excluded. (5, Chapter 11)

Some question whether innocent descendants of slave owners and colonialists should repay compensation to formerly enslaved and colonised nations. Postcolonial research, working with both groups of young descendants, shows how the former continue to benefit from the wealth, and the latter continue to suffer from its loss. This connects the past into the active present and opens new visions of a future sharing of sustainable prosperity. [Bryan Stevenson](#), one of the first American black lawyers, after decades of working with black prisoners in the US, where thousands of them are

imprisoned for life [when aged only 13](#), believes that justice will only ever be achieved by a formal truth and reconciliation programme. (10) Children's experiences and stories as well as their imaginative courage and hope are central to any moves towards greater peace, justice and prosperity (5, Chapter 12; 6).

Sustainable prosperity is guided by such beliefs as, we do not inherit the world from our parents, we borrow it from our children.

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