Civil Society

A presentation by Dr. Margo Fryer
at the launch of UBC's Trek 2010

Chan Centre
University of British Columbia
10 March 2005

I want to thank Chancellor McEachern and President Piper for inviting me speak today about civil society. It is an honour to be a part of the launch of Trek 2010 and to share the stage with my esteemed colleagues. I will offer some thoughts that, I hope, will provoke reflection and dialogue.

The Trek 2010 vision says that UBC will promote the values of a civil and sustainable society. In my talk, I am going to present some ideas on what civil society is and what the values of a civil and sustainable society might be. I will provide some examples from the Trek strategic plan of how UBC can strengthen civil society and contribute to social sustainability, and then I'll talk a bit about the challenges we face in engaging in such strategies based on our experiences at the Learning Exchange.

The London School of Economics says that, "Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family, and market, though in practice, the boundaries . . . are often complex, blurred and negotiated."[1]

So, civil society is a space that includes all kinds of voluntary social associations—charities, non-profit organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations and other coalitions.

Trek 2010 uses the phrase "civil society" in the customary way, to refer to this particular social domain. But it seems the phrase is also used to refer more generally to the way we interact with each other, to the extent to which we are civil or civilized in our relationships. Which raises the question of what is meant when we refer to "the values of a civil and sustainable society."

One possible answer was given by the Harvard Forum on Religion and Ecology. This forum brought together theologians, philosophers, and scientists to discuss the relationship between the world's major religions and the environmental and social challenges we currently face. After several years of discussion, this forum identified five principles or values that all the world's major religions share.[2] These are:

1. Respect
2. Reverence

3. Restraint
4. Redistribution
5. Responsibility

The Harvard forum connects these values to environmental issues but they can also be applied to questions related to social sustainability and civil society. The Trek 2010 strategic plan includes many initiatives that embody these values and show how UBC can contribute to the strengthening of civil society.

For example, under the People pillar, UBC commits to showing respect for social diversity and promises to ensure that admission and financial aid policies enable students from a variety of backgrounds to have access to UBC.

Under the Learning pillar, we acknowledge that students will need to push boundaries and take risks in search of new knowledge and unconventional ideas. One strategy that is intended to foster a sense of social awareness and global responsibility calls for UBC to encourage students to learn more about Aboriginal perspectives. First Nations peoples have much to teach about reverence for the environment and how to live in harmony with the natural world and with other cultures.

Under the Research Pillar, the Trek plan points out that in order to secure a sustainable and equitable future, we have to develop our understanding of a variety of problems including poverty and human rights abuses. The plan recommends that we build research partnerships with communities, including Aboriginal communities. Not only will such research require us to explore ways to practice restraint in relation to our use and distribution of natural, economic, and social resources, but it will demand that we practice personal and organizational restraint in order to successfully build collaborative relationships where agendas are negotiated not imposed.

The Community pillar of Trek 2010 says that UBC must respond to the needs and concerns of communities and it presents ideas about how we can redistribute our resources. For example, we can engage UBC students, faculty, staff and alumni in volunteer and community service-learning opportunities where their enthusiasm and energy can help strengthen programs in non-profit organizations and schools.

And finally, the Internationalization pillar highlights our global interdependence and our shared responsibilities to each other. It calls for new programs on global citizenship, civil society and related issues and new partnerships with groups in emerging countries.

So, we can see how those five values: respect, reverence, restraint, redistribution, and responsibility are integral to Trek 2010 and how we can enact these values to strengthen civil society in concrete ways.

But there are challenges. I will identify three significant, ongoing challenges that we have encountered as the Learning Exchange has developed its role in the Downtown Eastside over the past (almost) six years.

First, there is the question of how to build bridges between the university and non-profit organizations in the community. There are important differences between the academy and this particular aspect of civil society. For example, there is a perceived and to some extent, real power differential.

At the Learning Exchange, we often describe the community organizations with which we work as our partners. But we know that most of those organizations see UBC as having more money, more power—more resources of all kinds than they have. And some are suspicious of what they see as a monolithic bureaucracy with its own agenda. And even when an organization genuinely appreciates their collaboration with a particular unit such as the Learning Exchange, they can quickly go into a cautious, defensive position if they feel their own autonomy is being threatened or the realities of the constraints they work under are not respected. So, these collaborative relationships are wonderful opportunities to practice values like respect and restraint.

The second challenge I want to highlight is that posed by changes in the way Western societies care for their so-called "vulnerable" members. After the second World War, governments in the West took on responsibilities which formerly had been fulfilled by family members, neighbours, and informal social networks or charities. This led to what John McKnight, a community development expert at Northwestern University in Chicago, has called the professionalization of care.[3] McKnight goes so far as to refer to the care given by paid professionals as "counterfeit care" which he says can weaken communities and create "learned helplessness" among those who receive such care. As governments pull back from some social programs and policy initiatives designed to protect the vulnerable or disadvantaged, we face serious questions about who should be taking responsibility for the care of community members who are not self-sufficient.

- What roles should the various components of civil society play?
- What is the appropriate fit between the roles of government and non-government organizations or associations?
- What can or should be done to ease the transition for those who have become dependent on government resources that are being withdrawn?
- What can or should be done to respond to or resist these changes?

These are questions that demand profound reflection on the values of redistribution and responsibility as well as on the practice of restraint.

This second challenge leads to the third. In the Downtown Eastside, there is a concentration of people who are often referred to as "marginalized." Some are mentally ill, some are physically unwell or disabled, some are addicted to various substances, while others are outside mainstream society for other reasons.

While people in these circumstances may benefit from certain kinds of care, they may not be compliant with or appreciative of the efforts of those who aim to provide care. In fact, some are resistant or even hostile to such efforts. Some believe that the agencies or individuals who provide care are, in fact, their oppressors. The Downtown Eastside is a

neighbourhood where the dynamics of social exclusion and the playing out of complex social, economic, and cultural forces make questions about who should be caring for whom and under what conditions seem pretty daunting.

But the Trek 2010 vision presents an opportunity for us at UBC to become a community of practice dedicated to the exploration and cultivation of the qualities of global citizenship which can, through its activities, serve to strengthen civil society both locally and globally. We can engage in the practice of values that promote a civil and sustainable society.
I would like to close with an excerpt from a Health Canada report on the ethical and legal issues surrounding injection drug use and HIV/AIDS. I love this piece of writing because the author wraps the essence of the five Rs (respect, reverence, responsibility, etc.) as they pertain to civil society into one compelling question. The author believes that this question should guide our interactions with each other, even in situations where we might find it extremely difficult to find common ground.

The excerpt was written by Dr. David Roy, Director of the Centre for Bioethics at the Clinical Research Institute of Montreal and Research Professor at the Faculty of Medicine, Universite de Montreal. The excerpt is a response to the following policy question: What legal and ethical issues must be considered in allowing or tolerating drug use in the course of providing health care and social services?

Roy says,

> "The basic ethical issue underlying (this question) is contained in the question, 'Is there nothing between us?' The *us* here, involves all those who are despised, rejected, and abandoned because of their drug use, their disorganized lives, their disturbing behaviour, their HIV infection, their sexual orientation, or a combination of all of these factors. The *us* involves those who reject and abandon other human beings for all of these and other reasons. The *us* involves those who recognize the ethical imperative contained in the logic of humanity: the responsibility to care is strongest when the need for such care is for those who have become most distanced from their human dignity. The basic ethical issue is whether we endorse or whether we move far beyond the logic of exclusion expressed chillingly in the last line of Sylvia Plath's poem 'Medusa,' where she declares: 'There is nothing between us.'
>
> The basic ethical issue is whether we will live the ethic of humanity. To do so we have to enter a space that is not dominated . . . by the despising of diversity and its related logic of exclusion. For humanity is a space. Humanity is the space where those who limp through time, far out in the shadows and beyond the margins of respectability, status, privilege, and power are brought into the light of honour, rights, peace and dignity. Humanity is the space where those who are broken by their guilt, their losses, their disease, by their social rejection and abandonment and, eventually by their impending death, do not have to live and die lonely and alone. Humanity is the place where crushed spirits find persons

> who have the patience to breathe gently on the flaking gray ash of a human being's dying hopes to awaken a flame, a flickering flame, at least, of courage. Humanity is the place where people are accepted as they are, and are not—because of their diversity—denied their basic human and related civil rights, including in particular the right and need to see themselves as genuine and equal members of society and the community in which they live."[4]

---

[1] Hwww.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htmH. Accessed February 18, 2005.
[2] Daedalus Special Issue. Fall 2001. Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change? Vol. 130; No. 4.
[3] McKnight, John. 1995. The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits. New York: Basic Books.
[4] Roy, David. 1999. Injection Drug Use and HIV/AIDS: Legal and Ethical Issues. Background Papers. Ottawa: Health Canada.