

## **Editorial**

# **Liberal Sustainability Doctrine**

*"The earth was given to mankind to support the greatest number of which it is capable, and no tribe or people have a right to withhold from the wants of others more than is necessary for their own support and comfort."*

**- James Monroe (April 28, 1758 – July 4, 1831)**

The contemporary meaning of the term "sustainability" has become inextricably associated with the complex relationship between environment and development. But references to either "sustainable development" or "environmental sustainability" do not necessarily invoke similar responses in the political arena – depending on the geographical latitude that defines where the discussion is taking place.

When industrialized countries talk about "sustainable development," the ambient understanding is that current levels of economic development can be maintained – no matter how lopsided or unfair the rest of the world perceives the stakes. Whereas, "environmental sustainability" typically invokes prevention of depletion of natural resources typically in regions inhabited by relatively underdeveloped countries.

The debate has apparently been going on since the times of the fifth President of the United States, Mr. James Monroe, whose liberal-leaning pronouncement about the Earth's carrying capacity and admonition against oppression remains a quotable quote. But wars have been fought over the solution to the question of what qualifies as "necessary for their own support and comfort." If we are all to live like most in the "West," for example, the carrying capacity of the planet will be small indeed. But the ambition of the masses is boundless, while the resources of the planet are finite. This is why we must pay close attention to discussions about the environment – where the discussions are taking place, and what items are on the agenda.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, the *Liberia Environmental Sustainability Forum* will hold in Washington DC. The forum is expected to facilitate discussions among key stakeholders in the nexus of environment and development. It is interesting that the Liberian Environmental Protection Agency is hosting such a meeting outside the African continent. Perhaps the excuse is the focus on capacity building. But we must ask, capacity for what? The agency hopes to present its five-year strategic plan, and to form international and inter-sectorial coalitions that will be charged with addressing the countries numerous environmental challenges, including "critical issues regarding natural resources management, air pollution, waste management, environmental education, climate change, water pollution, renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, deforestation, environmental law and justice."<sup>1</sup>

In 2004, the United Nations Environmental Protection Agency published the "*Desk Study on the Environment in Liberia*" that included 60 recommendations distributed over 16 priority topics<sup>2</sup>:

**Post-conflict environmental assessments**  
**Environment in the reconstruction process**  
**Environmental governance**  
**International cooperation**  
**Environmental information and awareness**  
**Financing environmental protection**  
**Forestry**  
**Biodiversity**  
**Energy**  
**Mining**  
**Water and sanitation**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.trinity.net/africaenvironmentalwatch/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/Liberia\\_DS.pdf](http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/Liberia_DS.pdf)

**Solid waste**  
**Manufacturing**  
**Shipping**  
**Land-use planning**  
**Displaced people**

The UNEP study coincided with the formal establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency of the Republic of Liberia as an autonomous agency of the Government of Liberia through an Act of the National Legislature in 2003. The recommendations of the UNEP are very comprehensive and the work needed to implement them will take several generations. The hope is that the forum taking place this month in Washington, DC, where President Monroe made his home and his remarks more than a Century ago will squarely address the issues at hand, rather than another panhandling session that can undermine the sense of ownership of policies and their repercussions. James Monroe may have preferred that this forum take place in the capital city named for him. In Monrovia – the only capital city named for an American President outside the American continent.

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