Sustainability for Everybody:
Why Social Equity plays a Key Role in a Greener World

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Abstract

Sustainability needs to be accessible for everybody, and it is imperative that we ensure that our policies, regulations and legislations are not disproportionately leaving certain social groups in disadvantageous positions. It is important that our plans and goals to make our communities more resilient to climate change take into account important social factors such as accessibility and social equity. Our goal when it comes to sustainability should be trying to improve the quality of life for everyone as equitably as possible while also ensuring that we live within the limits of our environment.

Social Equity and Sustainability

"What are the social goals of sustainable development?"[2]
- ✓ Non-physical factors
  - ‣ social interaction/social networks
  - ‣ employment
  - ‣ fair income distribution
  - ‣ social and community cohesion
- ✓ predominately physical factors
  - ‣ urban development and design
  - ‣ quality of the local environments
  - ‣ accessibility
  - ‣ housing

Figure 3 © Stephanie Keith / Reuters
Protests Against the Dakota Access Pipeline

The Three Pillars

- ✓ Sustainability: "involves meeting our needs today while not comprising the ability of those that follow to meet their needs"[1]
- ✓ the concept holds itself on three main pillars: economic, ecological/environmental and social sustainability
- ✓ Economic sustainability: encourages the implementation of "policies that would achieve the highest sustainable economic growth and employment in order to stimulate employment and increase living standards"[1]
- ✓ Ecological sustainability: the "maintenance of essential ecological processes and life support systems" including humans"[1]
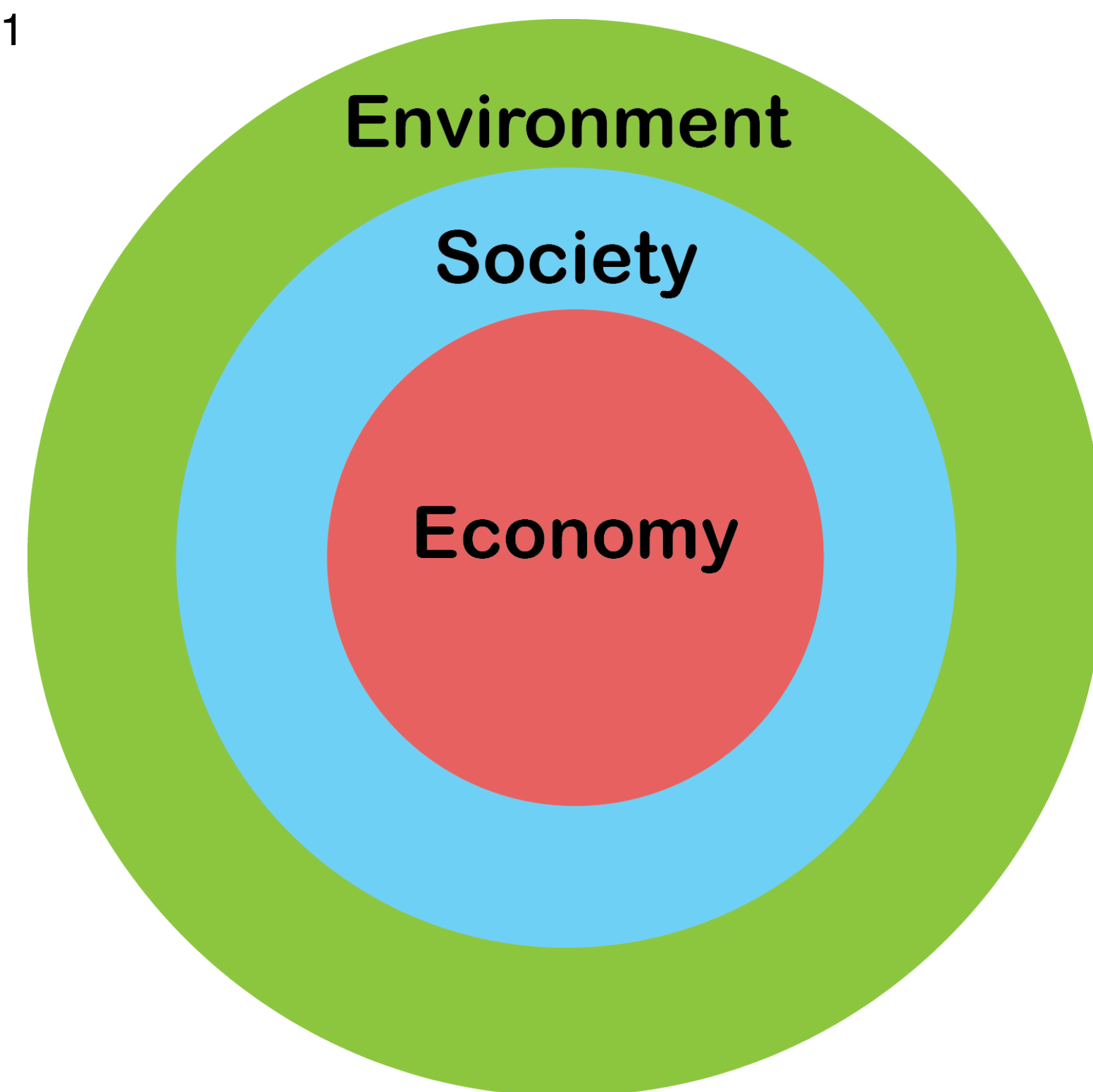

Figure 1. Three Pillars of Sustainability

Socioeconomic Status and Power

- ✓ Areas with higher rates of poverty and lower social cohesion are affected the most by environmental degradation[1]
- ✓ An increase in social capital through development could improve this
- ✓ A survey of the 50 US states found that states with greater inequalities in power distribution had less stringent environmental policies, greater levels of environmental stress, etc.[3]
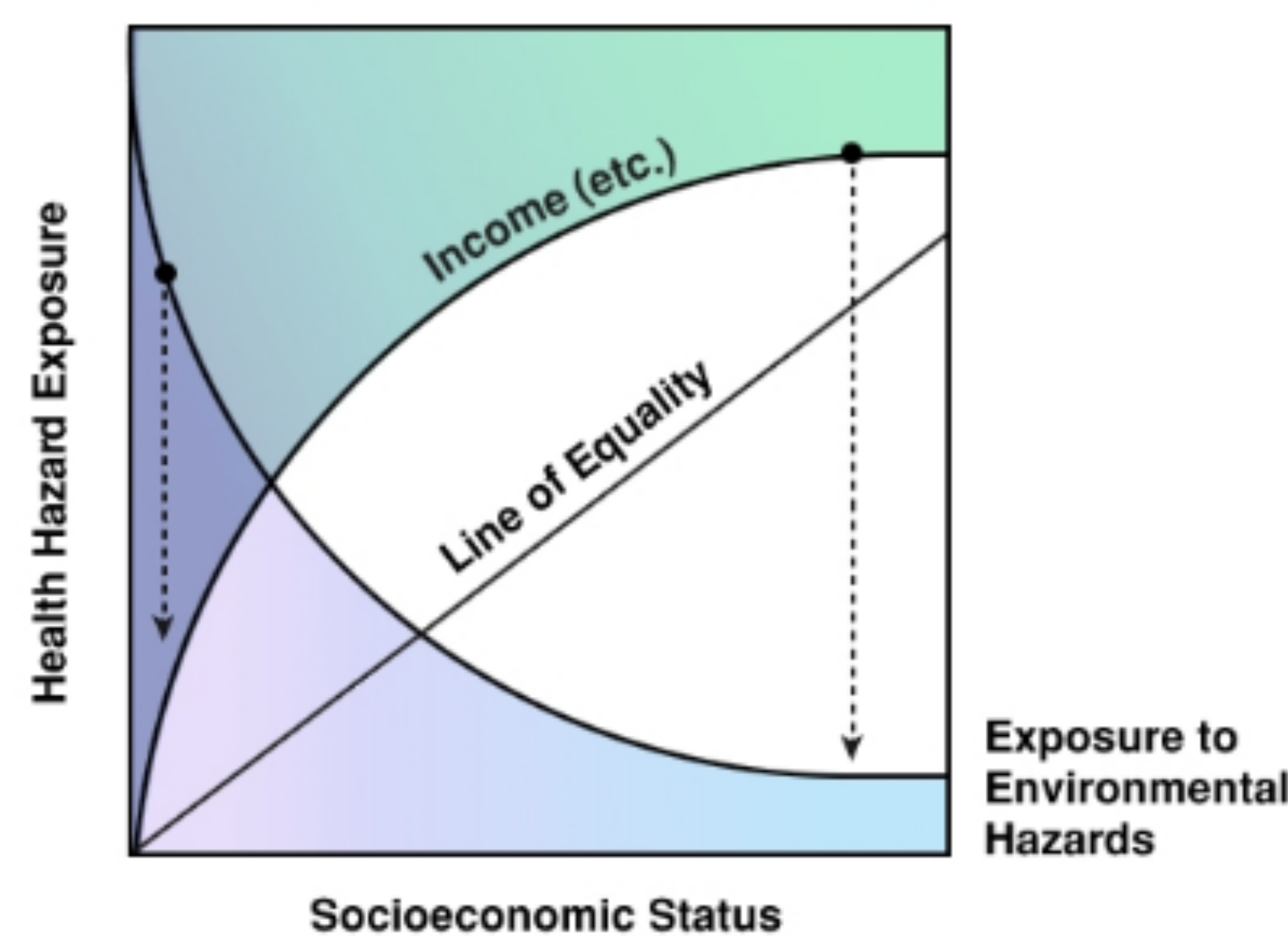
Figure 2 from *Canadian Environmental Health Atlas*

Target Areas and Priorities

- ✓ Accessibility and Social Equity should be our primary focus
- ✓ Improve the lives of everyone in our communities while using proper resource management
- ✓ "Environmental problems bear down disproportionately upon the poor", but the poor are not the major distributors[4]
- ✓ Companies who want profit ignore the environmental consequences of their 'product' and those who cannot afford to escape the consequences tend to be overlooked
- ✓ example: The Dakota Access Pipeline will exploit water resources of indigenous communities and affect the drinking water quality

Possible Solutions and Next Steps

- ✓ Globalization has led to increased competitiveness between global companies: connected to more and more unethical and environmentally detrimental business and production practices
- ✓ demand that policy makers heavily consider environmental justice when creating policies for sustainable development
- ✓ demand governments "at all levels [adopt] some kind of commitment to sustainable development" while stressing the "importance of placing this within the context of social and environmental justice, equity and human rights[5]
- ✓ this means "[ensuring] that public policy - environmental or otherwise- does not disproportionately disadvantage any social group"[5]

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