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Change Agent: Evolution of a Systems Champion

An Interview with Gus Speth

Gus Speth's distinguished career in environmental advocacy, public service, and higher education is the subject of his new memoir, [Angels by the River](#). Allen White, Senior Fellow at the Tellus Institute, talks with Speth about his personal and career journey from the mainstream to campaigner for systemic change.

Your wide-ranging career began in the 1960s when the modern environmental movement was in its infancy. What drew you to environmentalism in the first place?

Looking back, I would say that there was both a predisposition and a spark. In terms of predisposition, my childhood was replete with experiences close to nature: hunting, fishing, and camping in the outdoors of the American Southeast. Although these memories are mostly fun and playful ones, I also saw the damaging impact that humans could have on nature. One formative experience for me, in particular, was seeing a lake near my grandparents' house destroyed by tannery waste.

The spark was the realization that a great opportunity awaited me as a law graduate to participate in the environmental movement that was beginning to take shape in the mid-1960s. I thought, "Why don't we bring the law to bear on environmental protection as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund did for civil rights?" Many of my law school colleagues shared my enthusiasm. We were children of the 1960s: we'd seen the civil rights movement; we'd seen what could happen if people used the courts effectively and took to the streets to protest and get legislation passed. We saw this as a momentous opportunity to use our legal training for a social purpose.

During your career, you have held leadership positions in a variety of organizations, spanning environmental litigation at the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), science policy advocacy at the World Resources Institute (WRI), government service at the Council for Environmental Quality (CEQ), international engagement at the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and higher education at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. In which role do you think you had the greatest impact on driving change?

I feel very positively about all those jobs. These organizations are still doing great work, and I am thankful to have played a part.

Those early years at NRDC were, in some ways, the heyday of the environmental movement. We brought lawsuit after lawsuit to enforce the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and other new, foundational laws. And we had a large impact by doing so. One of our lawsuits, for example, succeeded in extending the scope of wetlands protection to most freshwater wetlands in the country.

In government, if you are in the right place in the right administration, you can achieve a great deal. And that was our situation with Jimmy Carter's CEQ. I don't think there has been a president since Teddy Roosevelt with such a basic environmental instinct and environmental interest.

During my time at CEQ, we released two major reports. One was our climate study, which consisted of four reports spanning from 1979 to 1981. It was one of the earliest calls for action on climate change. Unfortunately, the issue stalled when Ronald Reagan took office, but our work did help open the door to a much-needed, and ongoing, debate about energy policy in the US.

The other major report was the *Global 2000 Report to the President*, which forecasted out to the year 2000 to assess what key environmental conditions would be in a base-case scenario. Many of the frightening outcomes we predicted did materialize, a testament to how painfully slow the pace of progress on global-scale environmental and resource challenges has been in recent decades.

Was that report your first foray into international environmentalism?

Yes, it was. And it wasn't just mine. Most of the environmental movement here in the US had been focused primarily on domestic issues. There were occasional international meetings, of course, but they were not action-oriented. For the *Global 2000* report, we looked at deforestation and biodiversity loss, governance of oceans, and other global issues. The harder we looked at them, the more it seemed that we were on the way to creating a fool's paradise at home because we were neglecting the larger system within which our domestic environmental issues operate. That was the inspiration for my next venture, the creation of WRI as a global center of excellence for environmental policy and management.

In your new book, you reflect on the seeming contradiction between the expansion of environmental organizations worldwide and the steady deterioration of environmental quality. You identify the incrementalist, reactive strategy of many environmental organizations as one of the root causes of this divergence. Explain this diagnosis.

It is an interesting story. Many of the early writings about the environment in the late 1960s and early 1970s were quite radical by the standards of today's politics. For example, Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* and the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth*, both bestsellers, delivered sharp criticisms of the prevailing economic paradigm.

With the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act, there was finally a robust body of law that needed proper enforcement. At the NRDC, we took it upon ourselves as an environmental group, and as young lawyers, to put these laws into action.

What happened, of course, was that these very laws and the monumental effort required to activate them drew us away from the deep change advocated by early visionaries and into the mentality of the Beltway. We became part of the system that was working Congress, the agencies, and the media day-in and day-out. Although we were able to achieve a lot, when the politics moved to the right, we were still immersed in that system trying to make change, rather than thinking about how to change the system itself. That led to a certain tameness in the face of the shifting political forces that were making our work increasingly difficult and marginalized. At some point along the way, I think the environmental movement, myself included, should have taken a big step back and executed a mid-course correction to regain our footing.

Your critique of environmental organizations suggests that, to this day, this repositioning generally has not happened.

I love what NRDC and other groups are doing. What they do is invaluable. It is what they are not doing that is limiting their longer-term effectiveness. It is not a question of just growing more talent, scope, and funding. We have been doing that now for quite a long time, and yet we find that progress is very slow on a number of key issues, especially climate change.

A particular environmental group may have such a well-defined niche that it would make no sense to change. But the larger environmental community, with its formidable human, social, and financial capital, should be developing real power, compelling ideas, and actionable strategies to attain deeper, more systemic change. This isn't a problem just for the environmental community, however. I think there is a real problem in the whole progressive arena, where groups are siloed into their own set of concerns and too often seek to mitigate symptoms rather than address root causes.

As environmentalists, we have to ask the question, "What is an environmental issue?" The immediate answer is typically air pollution, water pollution, climate change, etc. But what if you

reframe the question by saying that an environmental issue is anything with a significant impact on environmental outcomes? That is, an environmental issue is whatever affects the prospects for success in meeting an environmental challenge.

Once you frame it that way, then you realize that our politics and our failing democracy are environmental issues. So are our runaway consumerism, our lifestyle, and our values. And so, too, are the nature of the corporation, the corporatization of our body politic, and the powers and freedoms that we give to these artificial entities. Economic insecurity is an environmental issue as well because conservative arguments about the job creation potential of extractive industry or the “job-killing” nature of environmental regulations will resonate more with people when they are living paycheck-to-paycheck. The environmental community must embrace a systems perspective that recognizes the interdependencies between economic, environmental, and social issues.

How influential was your work with UNDP in fostering your consciousness of systemic problems and systemic change?

Very influential. One of our policy crusades was reforming official development assistance (ODA). We published the *Human Development Report* every year and had the opportunity to suggest many major systemic changes at the global level. The World Bank is known for its longstanding advocacy for structural adjustment and other neoliberal policies. At UNDP, we argued that a far better way to use our time and talent and money would be to focus on childhood education, health care, family planning services, environmental restoration, and providing the poor with access to productive assets. We were promoting what we called “sustainable human development” as an alternative to structural adjustment in the hope of shifting policy discourse toward a more holistic, sustainable worldview. Unfortunately, as you can see, the old paradigm remains with us.

Having been a UN insider for half a decade and an active spectator of UN affairs since then, what do you see as the prospects for the UN to become a higher-performing global governance organization than it has been in the last two decades?

The UN still has an important role to play in development policy, in humanitarian work, in linking humanitarian work with recovery in war-torn societies, and in serving as the platform for global environmental governance and multilateral environmental negotiations. But the real center of power now has gravitated away from the UN and toward forums such as the G-20 and the WTO.

For the UN to achieve its full potential, it will require some major institutional restructuring. One example would be the creation of a body for social, economic, and environmental affairs with a smaller, rotating, geographically diverse membership. The creation of a world environment organization also merits serious consideration, whether by the establishment of a new entity or the transformation of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) into an effective world governing body for the environment. But, as in many cases where change is not keeping pace with the urgency of the global reality, these changes are likely to be driven by crises.

In your thinking about the prospects of transformational change, you draw a distinction between crisis and catastrophe. What is that distinction?

Crises can open up the possibility of deeper change, particularly by shining a light on the root causes of current problems. However, if we are careless and negligent and unlucky, we could end up with a catastrophe, instead, which might become so demanding, so frightening, and so requiring of money, time, and attention that it closes down possibilities. Just think about the climate crisis. If it were to spin out of control and become a catastrophe, we would be spending all of our time and energies in an effort to cope.

Your writings and the recently launched Next System Project tend to focus on the US. Why this focus in particular?

We started the Next System Project to call for a national dialogue about the need for deeper, systemic changes. It has become apparent to more and more people that the current system is failing us. It is just not programmed to deliver what citizens want and deserve. As a result, we need to think about moving to a new political economy. Defining and realizing such a system will require a conversation about the desirable and the possible. We need to overcome the idea that there is no alternative. Alternatives do, in fact, exist, and they would be a lot better at sustaining people, place, and planet.

Why focus on the US? Part of it, of course, is being an American and loving this country and wanting it to do better—a lot better. However, more importantly, the US is also a huge part of the global problem. We tend not to think of ourselves in that way, but my UN experience made clear to me that unless we get the US on a sustainable trajectory that successfully confronts global-scale issues like environmental degradation, poverty, and war, the world will continue to face daunting challenges and dire outcomes in the coming decades.

Are you despairing or hopeful that the US and the international community will rise to the occasion?

I feel gratified by my contributions over the years. But in the bigger picture, it is hard to conclude that they have been major successes. If current trends continue, we will leave future generations with a world fraught with multiple social, environmental, and economic crises. As Dee Hock once said, “things are much too bad for pessimism.” Our global reality is grim. But the last thing on Earth you do in such a situation is bow to pessimism and despair. For me, and I think for many, the only response is to work harder.

About the Interviewee



Gus Speth is an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute and co-chair of the Next System Project at the Democracy Collaborative. In 2009, he completed his decade-long tenure as Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. From 1993 to 1999, Speth was Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and chair of the UN Development Group. Prior to his service at the UN, he was founder and president of the World Resources Institute, professor of law at Georgetown University, chairman of the US Council on Environmental Quality in the Carter Administration, and co-founder of and senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council. He currently serves on the boards of the New Economy Coalition, the Center for a New American Dream, and the Climate Reality Project. He is the author, co-author, or editor of seven books, including the recent *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy* (2012) and *Angels by the River* (2014).

About the Publication

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