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The connected world

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The Connected World

Breaking The Rules
by working across boundaries
for peace, social justice and
sustainable enterprise

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Abstract

Connectivity, The State of the Planet & Social Development

We live in a strange age, in a paradoxical world. On one hand the open society allows information and communication to flow continuously around the world, and enough tariffs have been lowered and trade liberalised for most people to purchase globally traded goods. This world is awash with contact and connectivity. This world is also characterised by the liberal use and abuse of the Earth's energy resources and by surplus food supplies.

But in another world about two billion people have not yet made or received a telephone call and many people are denied the two fundamental human rights: freedom from fear and freedom from want.

The science of climate change makes it clear, whether we like it or not and whether we agree on how why it has happened, we are on the edge of a fundamental shift in our relationship with the planet. The climate change data is now indisputable, even if the causes of global warming are disputed. Climate change will have a disproportionately a greater effect on the poor but it will affect us all. Through global trade, increased travel and easy communications we also know enough about the world to understand how interdependent we are.

Through Roundtables in Sustainable Enterprise we have been reaching across boundaries between people whether they be professional, sectoral, intellectual or cultural. Conversational learning means putting people together who might not normally meet to talk about a given subject. In our case we have brought people together to discuss sustainable enterprise. The composition of our Roundtables is necessarily random and disparate.

Since January 2007 we have run eight roundtables in London, Cape Town and Toronto and a conference for 130 people from 19 countries. In all we have involved nearly 200 people.

Connectivity, The State of the Planet & Social Development

Introduction

We live in a strange age, in a paradoxical world. On one hand the open society allows information and communication to flow continuously around the world, and enough tariffs have been lowered and trade liberalised for most people to purchase globally traded goods. This world is awash with contact and connectivity. This world is also characterised by the liberal use and abuse of the Earth's energy resources and by surplus food supplies.

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If climate change is the issue that is uniting us, because it affects everyone – rich and poor, it also helps us all to see the world as a whole and to connect a multiplicity of global issues. Will the universal impact of climate change and the concomitant understanding of planetary ecosystems also enable light to be shone on delivering the social and economic aspects of international sustainable development policy which may in turn help us deliver the Millennium Development Goals? Given what we now know is this not the time to join the dots and integrate policy on economic, social and environmental issues in order to tackle the world's many divisions?

The immediacy of the question: 'what shall we do now?' is complemented by further questions such as 'what would the world look like if the ten UN Global Compact principles were implemented and if the Millennium Development Goals were achieved?' and 'what would enterprise look like if it reached the aspirations of the UN Global Compact and the many other sets of principles on corporate responsibility that have been negotiated over the last ten and more years?'. What would the world look like if we managed to introduce a universal carbon tax, universal primary education, and reduce the world's population to a manageable level? Change will be forced on us by climate change if we do not adapt rapidly to the changing situation.

The intelligent answer is that we should look at what works, learn from what works, break the rules, and talk across professional, sectoral and intellectual

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boundaries to find the nuggets of gold that lie hidden in a thousand flowering sustainable enterprises around the world.

The Current Reality

Both the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change and the latest IPCC Report say that there is a need for rapid adaptation to face the challenges that climate change presents. On one hand there is the challenge of not knowing what will happen and how we will change, and on the other hand the fact that we know enough about global climate, about economics and about ecology to make some of the changes that need to be made – but only if we seize the opportunity and are fearless. This will require us to break the current rules, to talk across boundaries and to engage in conversational learning.

The re-stratification of the world between those who are connected and those who are not has been highlighted recently by News Corporation's acquisition of the Wall Street Journal and the internet social networking site MySpace. On December 14 2007 under the advertising headline 'Free People, Free Markets, Free Thinking' the company boasted that the number of subscribers to MySpace were 'the equivalent of the 11th largest country' – 'the website reaches 170 million users every day'.

But perhaps the hard realities of climate change, population growth, terrorism, economic globalisation, pandemics and the BRIC quartet – Brazil, Russia, India and China – are matched by new ways and means of thinking about and seeing the world.

Most people who have looked seriously at the evidence, including Stern and the IPCC, point to four issues:

- market failure, which presents an enormous challenge for those who operate in the global market place including all global corporations;
- scientific illiteracy, which means that most people do not make the link between their personal lifestyle and the state of the Earth's ecosystem;
- a democratic deficit, which means that for most people our political, social and economic leaders fail on a daily basis to match our ideational goals with practical action;
- and institutional inertia, which means that our political, social and economic institutions are not fit for purpose.

Here are three comments which highlight the current economic system. First, from Crispin Tickell, former UK ambassador to the UN: 'markets are good at setting prices, but incapable of setting costs'. Second, from Fritz Schumacher, author of the 1972 classic *Small is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*: 'since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of

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consumption'. Third, from John Hendry author of *Between Enterprise and Ethics: Business and Management in a Bimoral Society* (Oxford: 2003) who has written that we live in an increasingly bimoral society where we are torn between traditional obligations of duty, respect, responsibility, caring and sharing which compete with entrepreneurial self-interest which cares not at all for community, the vulnerable, the dispossessed or the planet. This perhaps is the real clash of civilizations that has led to both our divorce from the planet and to disintegrated communities and fundamentalist philosophies of terrorism. Perhaps, also, this is the clash of the local and the global.

In 1944 Karl Polanyi published *The Next Great Transformation* in which he linked the nation-state and the market economy and discussed the need for new institutions that recognised the reasons for the twentieth century's two world wars and the great depression of the 1930s all of which destroyed millions of lives and laid waste cities across Europe and the world. Now we are at the point of recognizing the need for new institutions that can deal with the need for rapid adaptation to the global scientific consensus on climate change, to implement international sustainable development policy and to deliver the Millennium Development Goals.

An alternative scenario is that we conform to Jared Diamond's conclusion in his 2005 book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive?* Having surveyed societies that have gone before and disappeared he concludes that the common themes are: creeping normalcy and landscape amnesia, and the focus on what is an apparently rational linear approach when what is needed is an integrated, transdisciplinary approach. Are we in the same myopic state today?

Innovation, Social Networking and Conversational Learning

The network society allows for the possibility of new forms of interaction and learning and the creation of new knowledge paradigms.

Conversational learning has its roots in action research and appreciative enquiry and is based on the fundamental premises of sharing experiences, of learning from others, of talking across boundaries, of reciprocity and that music is made by the spaces between notes not by the notes themselves. In other words that conversation is in itself more dynamic than dialogue, that conversation can be a learning experience because it is not the dialogue of the deaf and not shouting from rooftops.

In Baker, Jensen and Kolb's 2002 book *Conversational Learning: An Experiential Approach to Knowledge Creation* they say that 'conversational learning is a process whereby learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversation'(Quorum 2002: 51). This is what has essentially been happening on our Roundtables on Sustainable Enterprise. We set the topic, invited a random, disparate, cross section of

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representative and unrepresentative people and sat them in a room for more hours than we had originally intended.

The last decade or so in the world of corporate social responsibility has seen significant initiatives through stakeholder engagement and the development of new social partnerships. These dialogues have produced new organisational forms of nested networks and values clusters of people with different backgrounds and perspectives reaching agreement on a negotiated way forward. In a networked world of social relations there are fewer obvious boundaries and certainly many territorial boundaries are made obsolete or irrelevant. This is the world of 'conversation as organisation' where, to quote geographer Doreen Massey, 'instead of thinking of places and organisations as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations'.

In a world of freneticism, of anything-goes and spin, how can we match our ideational goals with practical action to deliver peace and social justice to, and for, all? In the complex relations between people, planet and prosperity there is no clear view of the future because of mixed values systems, uncertain scientific futures (in terms of knowing exactly the full effects of climate change) and useful and destructive technologies. So we are moving into a world of complex data collection, beyond determinism where ambiguity, surprise and paradox are inherent while also recognising that we hold dear the imperatives of social development and environmental sustainability.

Emerging Themes From Conversational Learning on Sustainable Enterprise

From our conversations with some one hundred and twenty people in three continents we have established four sets of broad conclusions:

First, the emerging themes, consistent across three continents:

1. Change agents, or as we prefer to call them, partisans for change, working below the radar in corporations and in local communities have remarkable similarities.
2. In the disparate, unknowing environment of talking across boundaries and listening to 'the other' there have been many 'aha or expletive moments' for participants.
3. There has been much conversation around 'mission impossible' or 'mission possible', the former arising from those lonely moments of doubt when surrounded by a world full of frenetic consumption, the latter when, as now, the world wakes up.

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4. Profoundly, there has been the persistent call in three continents to re-evaluate what it means to be human. As one participant said: 'before we start thinking of new systems, new models, new policies and new strategies let us go back to basics and ask 'what does it mean to be human' and then build from that place'.
5. What is a human scale organisation and how can we design places where people want to go to work? We live in a world of organisations and institutions which create the infrastructures of our lives.
6. On education the question is not 'can people learn?' but 'how can people learn?' We need to embrace a love of travelling without certainty; of moving out of the comfort zone and this requires a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach.
7. Individuals are working across physical and temporal space in a 24/7 economy and a full-on global social and neural network. This requires the personal ability to establish boundaries or get burnt out and disaffected.

Partisans for Change for the Sustainable Enterprise Economy

Second, we have noted a range of character types in our conversations:

1. The partisan for change working in the corporation or and the community.
2. The entryist in the corporation, keeping well below the radar with the desire to change the beast's very being.
3. The sangoma, or thought leader, with learning, wisdom and ability to reach back into history and put difficult local problems into the context of the longer view.
4. The enlightened leader who is taking your organisation on the journey.
5. The slow change strategist working carefully and persistently not as a partisan or a leader but just nudging things in the right direction.
6. The mosquito, often working on the outside in the community being a persistent pest, asking awkward questions.
7. The change of life evangelist for whom the lights have recently come on and sees the bright future and now wants to make it happen.
8. The reflective practitioner who on looking at the evidence and considering their own actions realises there is something to be done.

9. The reflective researcher who on looking at the evidence is willing to follow the knowledge to wherever it leads

The Pattern of Local and Global Relationships

Third, whereas much of the literature on new social partnerships has been based on a tripartite approach we have learnt that a more nuanced understanding requires recognition of perhaps nine groups of actors.

The nine groups of actors are clustered in threes:

1. Representative government that is participative, accountable, and operates to the rule of law
2. Failed states with high levels of corruption, low accountability, are run by unrepresentative elites, and are nondistributive.
3. Other governments that operate largely within the rule of law, but are largely unaccountable and run by unrepresentative elites but are sometimes redistributive and are some of the largest
4. International NGOs with significant global memberships who have single interests and campaigns but sometimes seem out of touch with and unaccountable to their members.
5. Local NGOs who are community based and membership focussed.
6. Thought leaders who are in education, think tanks and research organisations.
7. Business as Usual – laggards, with earning per share as their primary focus and are largely reactive to peace, social justice and environmental issues. This is majority of the world's business.
8. Business as Unusual – these enterprises, publicly and privately owned are proactive on CSR issues, show leadership, have foresight, and create value and values in their supply chains, and understand and react to the challenges and opportunities in recognising that corporations are part of the political economy
9. Sustainable Enterprise Pioneers who are creative, innovative, enterprising, entrepreneurial and brave.

Recommendations

Fourth, we are working towards a set of recommendations for policy makers:

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1. Learning: resources need to be provided to enable rapid learning to take place across society on the science of climate change and the global ecosystem and the necessity for adaptation.
2. Current business models are inadequate for the situation we now face and while there has been some minor work carried out on company law reform the rules of incorporation need to change to reward sustainable enterprise.
3. Pioneers of change within large enterprises and sustainable entrepreneurs in corporations and communities need to be supported and rewarded.
4. Sustainable enterprises are fragile: they need safe incubation and nurturing. This is a role that could be played by leading 'business-as-unusual' corporations and by government. We cannot rely on the bravery and pioneering spirit of lonesome pioneers - now is the time to establish incubation units specifically for sustainable enterprises working in new areas and in new ways.

Applied Research and Action

In business and management education we need to produce a new breed of managers who are transdisciplinary relationship builders interested in asking and seeking answers to awkward questions. Now we need the best people interested in authentic engagement who understand that reaching out for new ideas has to become a way of life – something that many are calling part of the feminisation of management.

Through innovative learning that reaches across professional and sectoral boundaries and siloed intellectual areas we need to create a new knowledge paradigm and the only way to do this is to nurture individuals who have the capacity to work in a transdisciplinary manner.

New knowledge and solutions may come through crowd sourcing, flash mobbing and demographic changes that soon will leave many people over sixty with the time and money and motivation to humble those in power to make the necessary changes to save the planet, protect the vulnerable, and enhance human security for all, not just the many.