

Why We Need Visions of a Sustainable and Desirable World

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Creating a shared vision of a sustainable and desirable future is the most critical task facing humanity today. This vision must be of a world that we all want, a world that provides permanent prosperity within the Earth's biophysical constraints in a fair and equitable way to all of humanity, to other species, and to future generations.

Society is currently at a critical turning point. There is significant uncertainty about how environmental, social, and economic problems can be solved. However, there is growing consensus that the decisions we make as a society at this critical point will determine the course of our future for quite some time to come.

There is a tendency in thinking about the future to simply extrapolate from past trends. For example, if we have been getting materially richer in the past, then the future would be more of the same; if the environment has been deteriorating, then it will continue to do so. But one of the lessons we can learn from history is that trends often do not continue smoothly. There are tipping points and discontinuities that are impossible to predict from past trends. Many past civilizations have collapsed. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Berlin Wall being knocked down, attitudes changing toward smoking, and landing a man on the moon are recent examples of changes that were difficult or impossible to foresee.

We are learning more about the “process of change.” For example, a necessary ingredient to making changes in a positive and specific direction is having a clear vision of the desired goal that is shared by a large fraction of the members of the organization or community.^{1,2} A shared vision can change the world. In fact, it is one of the few methods that really can.

The challenge for the current generation of humans is to develop a shared vision that is both desirable to the vast majority of humanity and ecologically sustainable. This book is an attempt to contribute to a broad discussion on what a positive vision of the future is, should be, or can be. As Yogi Berra once said, “If you do not know where you are going, you end up somewhere else.” We have to decide where we want to go, and balance that with where it is possible to go. It is the only way to change the world.

Visionaries and theorists have often been characterized as mere impractical dreamers. People become impatient and desire action, movement, measurable change, and practical applications. Yet we must recognize that action and change without an appropriate vision of the goal, and analyses of the best methods to achieve it, can be worse than counterproductive. In this sense, a compelling and appropriate vision can be the most practical of all applications. To some extent, we can change the way the world *is* by modifying our vision of what we would *like it to be*.³

Envisioning can also be seen as a key, but often missing, element in a true democracy. Democracy is about much more than simply voting for representatives.⁴ It is about building consensus around the kind of world we really want. The New England town meeting is a good example of real democracy. It is a gathering where an entire town sits down, once a year, to discuss where they are, where they want to go, and how to get there. Can we scale up this process? In order to do that, we need an ongoing discussion about how that world might look. That is one of the issues this book is intended to stimulate. The global communications made possible by the Internet might make sharing visions and scaling up real democracy possible.

As ecological, economic, and social crises deepen, we desperately need new visions of a sustainable and desirable world. Isolated initiatives will not form an adequate response to our interconnected plights. Envisioning

must also be seen as an ongoing process in which community members collectively identify shared values, describe the future they seek, and develop a plan to achieve common goals (in Chapter 2). Envisioning complements more traditional forms of planning, serving as a tool for determining community desires and initiating the process of change. This needs to happen at multiple scales, from small groups and communities, to states, nations, and the entire planet.

Our civilization's challenge is thus to create positive and detailed visions of a sustainable and desirable future. This not only needs to be a future with sustainable quality of life as the overarching goal but also a future that captivates and motivates the public. In this future, living in harmony with nature is recognized as enhancing everyone's quality of life and can create a world that we are proud to bestow on our grandchildren. Until we create and widely share this vision, we have no hope of achieving it.

The 46 chapters in this collection all describe what a sustainable and desirable future might look like from a broad range of perspectives. They are written by some of the world's leading thinkers, representing all aspects of society.

The collection is divided into four parts covering: (i) the process of envisioning; (ii) "future histories," which describe the envisioned world from the future, looking back; (iii) detailed descriptions of certain elements of the vision; and (iv) ideas about how to get from here to there. The contributions cover a broad range of questions, including, What does a sustainable and desirable world look like? Which worldview, or shared belief system, should predominate? How should we design society's physical infrastructure (including our buildings, transportation systems, energy networks, and industries)? How should we manage natural capital (the goods and services provided by nature)? How should we educate ourselves? How should we govern and make decisions? What should the economy look like? What should characterize our social interactions?

The four parts of this book

Part 1 includes this introductory chapter and three others about the process of envisioning. The first of these, by the late Donella Meadows,

describes the process of envisioning and how we can, and urgently need to, do it better. The following two chapters by William S. Becker and Frances Moore Lappé encourage us all to envision and think differently about the kind of future we really want.

Part 2 is devoted to future histories. All the chapters assume that we are in the future and have already created the world we want. They describe this future and, to different extents, explain how we reached it. The first chapter in this section, by Robert Costanza and colleagues, describes what the worldviews, built capital, human capital, social capital, and natural capital might be like in 2050. The next two chapters, by Ajay Bhave and colleagues and Paul Raskin, outline some of the guiding principles, values, and hopes that exist in 2050.

The next three chapters each take a unique perspective on presenting a futuristic vision. Les Kuzyk describes a student taking a history exam in 2052, explaining how the world has changed since the beginning of this millennium. In his chapter “A Virtual Visit to a Sustainable 2050,” Robert Costanza uses a hypothetical virtual reality system to allow people today to envision a world in 2050, walk through it, and experience this new world. Joshua Farley takes a different approach in his chapter by describing the world from the point of view of a man on his deathbed, thinking about his family and the world they live in.

The chapter by Ron Colman, although providing a global vision, describes a path that the world took to reach it. It describes a turning point occurring during a meeting in Bhutan in 2013. The last two chapters in this part, by John Peet and Barbara Elizabeth Stewart, describe how a specific country (New Zealand) and a city (New York, USA) look in 2050.

Part 3 describes various elements that the world we want will need to incorporate. The first chapter, by the Prime Minister of Bhutan Jigmi Thinley, describes the development philosophy of Bhutan, based on well-being and happiness, as a model for the world we want. Martin Seligman describes “positive psychology” and how it captures the elements of human well-being that we want to enhance, both now and in the future. Wendell Berry describes his wish for the coal economy of eastern Kentucky to change to a sustainable local economy. Jane Roberts, Kavita Ramdas, and Jamie Querubin envision worlds with gender equality. The chapters by Bill

McKibben and by Dylan Walsh and Tess Croner form an interesting pair of quite different narratives told from the perspective of the year 2100. They explain two versions of what our path looked like to get back to 350 ppm CO₂ in the atmosphere. Daniel Pauly describes how changing our baseline in fisheries can help to get the bad old things to shift away and the good old things to shift back into focus. Richard Forman describes a future with roads that integrate with nature rather than dissecting it. Senator Gary Hart describes how the military will require resetting, rebuilding, and reform to address 21st century security issues. Peter Bartelmus discusses how green national accounting can help us achieve a sustainable future. And in the final chapter of this part, James Gustave Speth lays out a comprehensive vision for a new sustainable American economy — America the possible — that could again be a positive model for the world.

Part 4 is about getting from here to there. It includes 21 chapters covering a broad range of topics and issues. William Rees lays out how we can achieve the reductions in material throughput, energy use, and environmental degradation necessary to meet humanity's needs within planetary boundaries. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme provide an integrating story of our connection with the cosmos to guide the future. Bill McKibben encourages us to get angry about the current state of affairs to stimulate movement. David Orr describes how we can avoid the “perfect storm” threatening humanity. Ernest Callenbach shows how a smaller economy can be stronger, more sustainable, and provide a higher quality of life. Brian Walker shows how to apply resilience thinking to help us achieve our sustainability goals. Penny Sackett describes the need to conserve the chemical building blocks of all life and economic production. Anders Hayden shows how work time reduction can lead to a better and more sustainable work–life balance. Mohan Munasinghe lays out millennium consumption goals to compliment the millennium development goals for a sustainable future. George Burns shows how a focus on psychological well-being and happiness can help create the world we want. Van Jones describes the new green economy based on production, thrift, and ecological restoration while Hunter Lovins describes an economy based on sustainable happiness rather than gross domestic product (GDP) madness. Christine Loh shows how ecological restoration can be the basis

for a sustainable future while Eckart Wintzen advocates ecological accounting and taxation to fund this restoration. Pahuna Sharma-Laden and Croix Thompson show how agroforestry can be a key component in this restoration. Katherine Richardson and Ole Wæver describe the new science–policy links needed to achieve the world we want. On a lighter note, Maria Páez Victor describes how bringing classical music to the underprivileged in Venezuela has transformed people’s lives and can serve as a model for education. Peter Senge moves beyond industrial age education to a description of what education for a sustainable future would look like, based on systems thinking and learner-centered engagement. Tim Kasser shows how fundamental values can be changed to achieve the world we want, while Catherine O’Brien shows how we can do this with courses in sustainable happiness. Finally, Peggy Liu shows how changing values can lead to sustainable consumerism.

We hope that this collection paints a picture of the kind of world we want, one that is sustainable, fair, and prosperous. But it is certainly not the end of the story. It is only the beginning since, as Donella Meadows points out in her chapter, the process of envisioning is critically important and we need to develop innovative ways to broaden people’s engagement in that process in order to build a shared vision that can motivate positive change. We hope that this book helps stimulate that process and that everyone will participate.

References

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