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Sustainability for wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

I consider the record of failure of the current arrangements of capitalism to deliver sustainability: the failure to anticipate tipping points; the over-optimism of business to deliver sustainability; the immorality of markets; and the increasing loss of public trust in democracy. I consider how to resurrect the meaning and definition of sustainability for the emerging age of human wellbeing and betterment. It is possible that the manner in which our governing institutions function actually contributes to the acceleration and intensity of critical thresholds. I discuss the relationship between international, national and local levels of governing to bring about a transition in the coming decade. I review the conditions to promote citizenship opportunities for otherwise unemployed young people and consider the prospects for the success of such initiatives at the local level. These are not perfectly connected solutions: but they are relevant ingredients for any transition to sustainability.

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1. Providing the setting

I believe we are at a “critical threshold” over how we approach wellbeing and betterment for the human race. It is not just that we have lost any clear evidence that conventional economic ideologies and market mechanisms can maintain global prosperity. It is because that this paradigm is delivering huge social inequalities, massive sequestration of wealth in fortress tax havens, persistent unemployment and loss of social contribution in expensively educated young people, and the provable emergence of potentially irreversible transitions in the life support systems of the planet. I will make the case that we are uniquely at a turning point in the course of human affairs. Yet sustainability does not seem to count for much, appearing to most people as both mystifying and seemingly irrelevant.

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In this contribution I will briefly examine the role of “tipping points” in human transitions and explore their relevance for today’s failures to approach sustainability. I will also look carefully at the record of failure of the current arrangements of mismanaged capitalism to deliver sustainability, and why. And I will consider how to resurrect the meaning and definition of sustainability for the emerging age of human wellbeing and betterment. What is less certain is that I can offer any recipes which will work. I fear we have created dangerously brittle institutions which feed on perverse outcomes and which impede the very pathways for change which we seek. Indeed, it is possible that the manner in which our governing institutions function actually contributes to the acceleration and intensity of critical thresholds. Along with the companion papers of this series, I share the view that all levels of government and business are unable to work their way into sustainability. This is a function of huge complexity of institutional arrangements, regulations and procedures, contaminated by extensive lobbying for continuation of non sustainability, and coupled to inadequate means for measuring ecological resilience and human wellbeing.

Yet, even with these severe dysfunctions, it seems that the most promising scope for sustainability transitions lies at the local scale so long as there is a supportive national and international framework. It is here where we must turn our attention. This group of papers examines this challenge: here I will concentrate on particular initiatives at the local level involving sustainability transitions for young people.

2. The current failures and the likelihood of tipping points

The interpretation of tipping points is as diverse as those of sustainability, and the associated abuse of the phrase and hence of mischief-making in its uncritical and ubiquitous use, equal in intensity. The idea is connected with the notion of a blow which causes instability in an object or activity and its subsequent repositioning into a new state. *Gladwell (2000)* made the phrase popular by introducing the concept in epidemiology of a sudden shift in the course of a disease from afflicting a few to contagion of the many. In this exercise he was playing to subtle fears of catastrophe, of unavoidable disaster. And in so doing, he highlighted the reality of highly complex interconnected processes which may contain “viruses” of chaos in existing human calm. In effect, tipping points are metaphors for fear, for fatalism, and for falling. They reflect an age where convulsive hazardous and politically tumultuous events, once deemed almost unimaginable, are becoming more common, and where a loss of any sense of control breeds anxiety and excessive risk aversion. Consequently, the term is used casually in all manner of media reporting, particularly over events in the Middle East, and in the Eurozone. The almost ubiquitous and sloppy use of the term “tipping point” has tended to demean its significance recently, yet its importance for the grappling over sustainability transitions cannot be denied.

A better notion of tipping is “critical transition” as used by *Scheffer (2009)* and by *Barnosky et al. (2012)*. *O’Riordan and Lenton (2011)* used the phrase “tipping elements” to characterise inherently rapid reinforcements of change in Earth systems, particularly in the realms of ice melt (Greenland and the Arctic) and the drying of the Amazon forest.

What is clear about such matters is that they cannot be predicted with any assurance. But if they do runaway, then the outcomes (such as rapid sea level rise over a decade, or unforecastable variations of monsoons and tropical storms, or widespread roasting drought) could be magnified over the existing huge stresses of poverty, human rights abuses, violence, and forced migration already occurring all over the world. Whatever transitions are attempted at the local level could be suffocated by these highly unavoidable forces of perverse convulsion.

Furthermore, there is no mechanism in our current policy making and market based institutions which can prepare us for such eventualities until they effectively overwhelm us. We have so far failed to create the necessary safety nets of economic comfort and social assurance for adaptation and accommodation, should critical thresholds be passed. This combination of anxiety and avoidance combine perniciously into a suppressed panic that we are knowingly contributing to outcomes over which our grandchildren will be largely unprepared and deeply vulnerable.

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