



The Diamond
of Responsibility

The Sustainable Development Goals: Solution / Seduction - A Wicked Look at Goals 8 and 12

"The more we study the major problems of our time, the more we come to realize that they cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means that they are interconnected and interdependent."

FRITJOF CARPA



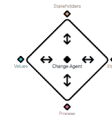
The Sustainable Development Goals:

Solution / Seduction - A Wicked Look at Goals 8 and 12

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ABSTRACT

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs) are a complicated solution to the environmental, social and economic problems we face on our planet, with heavy demands on its dwindling resources. Based on our current economic system - the market economy – there are confrontational tensions between the goals. This article focuses on SDG Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth and SDG Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production. The SDGs are very seductive because they offer a solution but the solution is also part of the problem: what they seek to solve is a Wicked Problem and is, as such, unsolvable. We can use technology and our creativity to improve their impact but this is also dangerously seductive. We need to go still deeper and change our own behaviour – by taking Personal Responsibility – and this change in thought and deed will help us to take on a revolutionary Planet Economy. With these two concepts driving the SDGs we have a real chance of achieving a life-affirming present and a positive future.



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A WICKED PROBLEM

The Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs) ^[1] are seventeen internationally agreed focus areas deemed necessary for our survival as planetary citizens.

The SDGs have to address a real conundrum in developmental terms, an economic conundrum that affects us all: how do you balance the needs of the many with the demands of the few, and enable a reasonable standard of living for most, when a mainly western consumerist culture - the privilege of a global minority - is the must-have but flawed paradigm, with a mainly unknown effect on our society and on our natural environment?

The matrix for these seventeen SDGs ^[2] displays a high degree of complexity and, taken together with their 169 targets, is almost overcomplicated but there has been some work undertaken on mapping the interactions between the goals (see ^[3]grading the interaction of the goals), which is, in our view, a proactive and practical instrument for dealing with the complexity of the SDG matrix. It is not the complexity, though, that is a problem within the goals: it is the tension between the aims of the various goals, such as those between *Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth* and *Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production*, which is why we are having a wicked look at these two in this short paper.

A Wicked Problem is a problem that has the following characteristics: no definite formulation; no stopping rules; no ultimate solution; is essentially unique and is always a symptom of another problem. It is hardly surprising, then, that the process in achieving the agreement on the SDGs was a long one, as the SDGs seek to solve the unsolvable - a Wicked Problem.

The SDGs have both solution and seduction inherent in their aims to deal with the very complex – and wicked - problem of Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development is often regarded as an oxymoron ^[4] in that human development in its current form is unsustainable because our planetary resources are finite and under pressure, particularly as developing countries naturally aspire to increase the prosperity of their citizens, whilst

the developed countries seem unwilling to relinquish their deeply-seated, divisive and destructive consumerism. Do the SDGs help to solve this problem or do they deal only with the symptoms and not with the underlying issues? In our view, they are part of the Wicked Problem they were negotiated to solve, because they are both a seduction and a solution: seduction, because they are based on the paradigm of a market economy, which, although tweaked, is still going to mean an unsustainable present and a chaotic future; solution, because without the SDGs, our future is as bleak as we can imagine. And there is also irony here, as an intended solution is still part of the Wicked Problem it is elected to solve.

TENSION

SDG 8 is a core goal for businesses, and is the perfect goal for opening up a discussion on the role of business in society. SDG 12 is aimed more at individuals, at the personal level of action.

The tension between these two goals lies in the conundrum that the desire for the growth needed to make the money that drives the world's economies, and thereby raise standards of living (SDG 8), is set against the fact that we are consuming too much, and not making an effective and sustainable use of the world's resources (SDG 12). Under SDG 8, target 8.1 asks for at least a 7 % GDP growth per annum in the least developed countries. As a comparison, at the time of writing, the spread of the GDP growth rate ^[5] (annually) is the US: 1.9%, India: 7.3 %, Egypt: 2.3 %, Russia: -0.4 %, China: 6.8 % and Brazil: -2.9 %. With SDG 12, Target 12.2 asks for the "efficient use of natural resources" and it is obvious from our reliance on finite resources and by the waste we produce, that this is not the case internationally.

SDG 12 can act as a counterforce to this old paradigm of more material wealth: responsible consumption. It is up to us to prove our creative capacity and responsibility ^[6] as inhabitants of planet Earth and we need all available brains with their owners' behaviour, to solve this equation: growth + efficient use of natural resources x 1,000,000,000 people ^[7,8] than today that need to be integrated on our planet by 2030.



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There is obviously tension here, if not downright conflict. 10 of 195 countries have a growth rate of 7% or more ^[9] and, even with this modest percentage, we are fast depleting our available non-renewable resources, despite desperately introducing recycling/reuse measures and circular economy ^[10] actions, such as making manufacturers responsible for the items they produce (which means the polluter in effect pays), in our attempt to slow down our resource consumption.

Plastics are currently very much in the spotlight due to their useful ubiquity and the difficulty in recycling much of them, so they are both a boon and a scourge. They are hugely flexible and useful materials, yet come from a dwindling resource, oil, and pretty much all plastic ever produced is still on the planet in some form. By 2050 it is estimated that there will be more discarded plastic in our oceans than fish. In 2018, China stopped importing waste, including plastics, as the processing of these materials was not in line with its higher economic aspirations, and the pollution caused by this processing was in itself too damaging to their national environment. Elsewhere, the system for shipping waste from the developed and dirty nations to countries who have needed the cash for their economic growth is either collapsing or ending up under the control of criminals, who cause worse damage and pollution through their illegal and uncontrolled methods.

TECHNOLOGY

Fortunately, we are starting to apply innovative technological solutions for turning plastic waste, for example, into energy or even other forms that can be used as a fuel, taking the product back almost to its original state.

Oil will eventually become a resource that is far too valuable to burn and that amazing material, plastic, will become a resource to be treasured and reworked. Technology has played a crucial role in accelerating our development as a species and in developing our material prosperity, which has been historically boosted by the market economy. Until fairly recently, this was supported by a mindset of endless resources; the sky was the limit...and now we are eyeing up asteroids to be exploited for their mineral content.

Let's take an example of technological advance using cars (automobiles), a product with which we have fallen in love. Cars fulfill a variety of roles, not all of them to do with personal transport from A to B. They can be objects of desire and stylish status symbols, full of innovation and wonder; places of passion that deliver road-trip freedom; mighty industrial and political foci; and they are very useful for all kinds of mundane carrying activities. Cars impact many areas of our lives and they have become must-haves.

However, as the number of cars (and other internal combustion engined vehicles) increased, so have tragically avoidable road fatalities, air and noise pollution, congestion and the use of non-renewable resources: pictures of huge, black tyre-dumps are very unsettling portents of a desolate future. To come to grips with this, we are still in the era of "more of the same" as a solution: the electric car. We are discovering, though, that we might be going from bad to worse since the manufacturing process for electric vehicles consumes even more precious non-renewable resources, still adds to the tyre dumps, poses new questions about where and how to dispose of the batteries used and raises new problems on how to provide the infrastructure and electricity needed for charging these vehicles.

CREATIVITY

So, how do we change this behaviour and stop the car crash of our current actions, where the volume of products is required to increase due to the anticipated growth of GDP (target 8.1), helped by the rising wealth of a larger population expecting and demanding the desired for improvements in things and living standards, whilst at the same time all this collides with the use (and abuse) of our natural resources?

The positive side of this actually lies in the tension between sustainability ^[11,12,13,14] and development ^[15,16]: this will lead to solutions, because it will generate a substantial amount of creativity on our part – we would



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all agree that we are never short on ideas! This is where SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 9: Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure come into the frame. Looking back at car tyres, until a few years ago, their complex structure made them almost impossible to recycle. Prof. Veena Salajwalla from the University of South Wales, Australia, realised that the carbon and hydrogen content in old, used tyres was perfect for making green steel. The production of Green Steel is now a reality ^[17]. Creative thinking has here brought a novel twist to an old system of production, solving the double problems of waste tyre pollution and resource over-use in one process.

Whilst on the subject of transportation, there is also an alternative to our current system of producing, selling and owning cars that would work with electric vehicles and complement other mass forms of transport such as local 'buses, trams and rail networks that is not only a technological one - it is the Whole Brain Car Factory.

The Left Side of this brainy production would be responsible for producing new cars and the Right Side would see that used cars are dismantled and sent to the Left Side driven factory for reuse in the production of new vehicles. All cars are owned by the manufacturers and leased to the drivers of the car. The factories pay tax on any dismantled material that is not re-designed and re-used in the manufacture of new vehicles. This means that the business model as well as the development unit of the factory have to be rethought and reworked, in order to reduce this resource consumption, tax the production properly and achieve, in the end, a realistic leasing or hiring price for the driving customer.

For sure cars in new forms - along with improved and accessible mass transit systems – are still very likely to be needed since we shall have 1,000,000,000 new customers to satisfy in order to reach the anticipated growth rate of at least 7% GDP per annum in the least developed countries. This will increase the GDP per capita... and in a market economy, the craving for more material wealth will continue. Can we - or will we - allow this to happen? The whole concept of car ownership and use is in any case already changing and the days of individual car ownership as we know it are definitely numbered. Autonomous cars are becoming a reality and pods, as presented at the Geneva Motor Show 2019, are smart-phone operated car-pooled vehicles

which will become a new normal as our urban lives, in particular, develop.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND A PLANET ECONOMY

We cannot get away from the reality being addressed by the SDGs so we need to take action now. Crises generate innovation but we would hope that we, as an intelligent species, would recognise that the SDGs point to a crisis and thus take action before we are overwhelmed.

To help us, we believe in a necessary change of mindset to more Personal Responsibility ^[18].

Personal Responsibility is frequently on the lips of politicians, entrepreneurs and social commentators when talking about the need for individuals to make a change and take action, or to accept that the individual is somehow at fault where there is a moral dimension at play (which the individual may not openly recognise). We see Personal Responsibility as a way of giving core guidance to underpin new thinking and new action, such as prompted by the SDGs. An example of this would be to replace the aggrandising, "sky's-the-limit" market economy ^[19,20] with a Planet Economy: as individuals we have a real part to play here in changing the way we live.

Planet Economy is an economy which limits our actions down to the carrying capacity of this planet and has strong built-in boundaries given our limited planetary resources. Our current market economy is expansive i.e. unlimited growth, so these resources are by definition time dependent: even a slow and responsible consumption as proposed by the SDGs, which makes the resources last longer, still means in a distant future that they will be used up. This is the predicament for us as humans and for our world. In this context, Sustainability is meaningless.

Sweden has 32 times more GDP per capita (buying power) than India and this imbalance, together with the



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current western cultural ^[21,22] domination of the world scene, will fuel the global dialogue in the years to come on how to redistribute wealth (see SDG 1: no poverty). In a world of resource stress, our precious resources - including water - must also be so husbanded that they last for all coming generations. It is very possible that countries like India or China - which is currently buying up a lot of the world's key resources - will create new models of use and reuse that will eventually help us all.

CONCLUSION

Sustainability as a goal, though, really is a pipe dream - it cannot happen, particularly when one of the main solutions for our current environmental, economic and social travails, the SDGs themselves, are founded on old-fashioned and out-moded economic thinking.

They promise a possible solution to a Wicked Problem as explained above, but this is also seductive, which is why we need to make some key additions to the SDG process.

As a species we have huge power, so much so that we have coined a new era to describe our presence, the Anthropocene ^[23], which is actually seen as the speeding up of evolution. We have always used tools, so technology is both part of the answer as well as part of the problem, but we also need to speed up our evolution in terms of our mindset and actions now, rather than put our faith solely in future technological advances. We can no longer act like swarming locusts, consuming everything in our path, but must become stewards or custodians of a better world for all, both in the here and now and for future generations. Personal Responsibility is a way of taking control and ensuring that positive change can happen.

Old school capitalism, or more correctly our market economy ^[24,12], seems to be driving us less as Homo Sapiens but more as Homo Economicus, characterized by self-interest, who has been used as the subject of economic theory. This character does not exist, of

course, and we often act irrationally and, as social animals, altruistically, so actually unlike economic man. In economics, alternative theories and possibilities are already being envisaged by radical economists and thinkers like Kate Raworth ^[25] or Paul Mason ^[26], who recognise that the current mould has to be broken if we are to thrive. We are a creative species and have frequently thrown over accepted orthodoxies before: we can certainly do it again to avoid the distinct possibility of the broken and dystopian future so beloved of science fiction.

The SDGs might be filled with tensions and potential conflicts, but they are still currently the best internationally agreed process and platform we have to avert catastrophe by inspiring a fundamental paradigm shift in the way we think and act, thus enabling us to improve our present and reach a positive future. We feel we can make this impact of the SDGs much better now through a healthy leavening of Personal Responsibility along with the new Planet Economy.

I speak the tongue of a race the acme of whose mentality is the maxim: time is money. Material domination.

JAMES JOYCE, ULYSSES (PARIS 1922 / PENGUIN 1968) P.134

This is not a dig at James Joyce, who is a truly great writer, full of insight and stylistic innovation, but a dig at the old 20th century "greed is good" paradigm. In the 21st century this is still seductive, but it is no longer a solution.



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