

Working for Change

The growing gap between the rich and the poor is growing but sustainable futures provides a challenge. Realistically, the contemporary situation is totally unsustainable, given our current use of resources and technologies, for all in the world to reach a standard of living now enjoyed by the top 5 %. Improving the standard of living for all demands a rethink that involves all. Even with so few enjoying “the good life” the patterns of resource usage are totally unsustainable. So, in the interests of all, we need to find new ways of using resources with a key priority being to live within the carrying capacity of the earth. Renewable resources become more important as does the elimination of waste. Thus, when we engage in “development” as the raising of the standard of living and enhancing the livelihoods of those less fortunate in terms of their access to the benefits of the six capitals, we also need consider how those who are currently enjoying these benefits are also going to need to unlearn and re-develop. We need new technologies alongside new mind-sets. (think tragedy of the commons)

When we engage in development work, a term I am troubled with, I prefer inclusive, integrative sustainability, our goal, in my view, is work with this concept and think of it in terms of new technologies and mind-sets. I prefer integrative because it implies a coming together, and sustainability implies living within the carrying capacity of the world. However, inclusive, integrative sustainability thinking does not happen in a vacuum. This moves us to a critical appreciation of values. First, we have to accept that current trajectories of trends are driven by value laden patterns of behaviour. Capitalism, or drivers of capitalism, seems to be hard wired into us. There seems to be a natural tendency in contemporary societies to want to accumulate – a tendency driven by a sense of insecurity, or greed, often containing a desire for power. Power and wealth are seen as bedfellows and often seem to go along with forms of assertion and coercion, with violence being an extreme. The seemingly benign use of power and wealth can lead to power through benevolence, which, because of human nature, can feed into dependency and entitlement among the recipients. This then can lead to interpretive judgments assuming a superior stance, thus reinforcing a perspective of “us” and “them”. This is particularly insidious when it creates stereotypes.

The theoretical framework I want to suggest for those concerned enough to work at the confluence of those with resources and commitment to change is to create models through dialogical processes and drawing on systems thinking knowledge which avoid the traps we know of. This implies working in the uneasy space between the present and the future. Our short term solutions must not create problems for our long term solutions, and our long term solutions must not blind us to our current realities. How can we work with the immediate without compromising the future?

This requires a particular type of leadership. This leadership has to be embedded in a values seeking, values driven connective and adaptive ethos.

Such leadership would need to engage with the immediate and contextual as well as the deeper and conflictual issues of human nature.