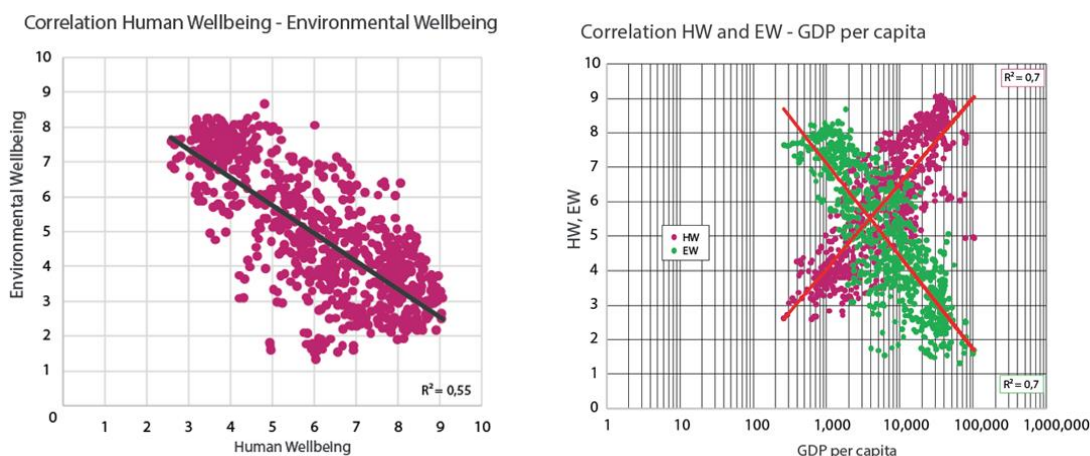


Suggestion for a comprehensive approach of development towards a sustainable world

The main message of our article in the February issue of Mother Pelican *Is the world actually making progress towards sustainability?*, might well be that Human Wellbeing (HW) and Environmental Wellbeing (EW) (<http://www.ssfindex.com/ssi/framework/>) are indeed on collision course. This was illustrated by two graphs which are based on five editions of the Sustainable Society Index (www.ssfindex.com).



The first figure shows the correlation between HW and EW and the clear downward trend; the second graph shows the correlations of HW and EW with Income. The correlations are clear and statistically strong, though not necessarily causal ones.

These figures unmistakably support the common opinion that higher income leads to higher HW and to lower EW. It means that if we continue with 'business as usual' it can be expected that the planet's ecosystem will be 'out of order', not yet today, but in the near or more distant future. This is in line with the conclusions of the report *Limits to Growth* (1972). As you know, the authors (Dennis Meadows et al.) developed a computer model with four variables: possibly available resources, different levels of agricultural productivity, of birth control and of environmental protection. They explored a number of scenario's, one of them being the business as usual scenario. The recent 40-years update of these scenario's shows that the world is still on the 'business as usual' track and thus affirms the conclusion of the authors that we might soon reach a number of tipping points, resulting in an unknown kind of collapse of the ecosystem.

People understand the world mainly by looking. Invisible threats, especially the long term ones, appear not to play an important role in our evolutionary thinking.

State of the world. 2003

Decoupling HW and EW

With respect to development to a sustainable world, we humans are in the drivers' seat, as long as we will not be overtaken by micro-organisms, plants, animals or robots. It's up to us. Everybody

strives for improvement of his or her personal wellbeing, to start with the basic needs, followed by other needs, higher on the Maslow pyramid. For most of us, this requires a higher income. But as shown earlier, a higher income and a higher personal wellbeing might very well result in a lower environmental wellbeing. That's not a nice perspective. To not completely destruct the precious and vulnerable ecosystem on earth, the main challenge of humankind will be to change the collision course of HW and EW by decoupling HW and EW. So all hands on deck for the decoupling.

I'm not going to suggest that we have to return to paradise where greed was non-existent and life was well within the limits of the planet's bearing capacity. We have left paradise a long time ago and even have forgotten where it was.

The earth offers enough for everyone's need, not for everyone's greed.

Mahatma Gandhi

In the following sections I will briefly suggest in main lines how to approach and possibly achieve the decoupling. An approach, which can start tomorrow, no, which has started already quite some years ago. But we will have to accelerate our efforts since the tipping points might very well be quite near. Maybe we already have passed one?

1. Local initiatives

One doesn't have to search long to perceive many initiatives aimed at sustainability at local level. While at national and international level many countries fail to make sound decisions with respect to development towards sustainability and hardly ever take adequate measures, at local level people 'just do it'. Cooperatives have started to produce renewable energy, to produce local food, to save resources by repairing goods and trade in second hand goods, to set-up local money systems and so on and so on. This has an enormous power and by now in many places everybody speaks of 'sustainability'. It is no longer an 'ugly' word. It becomes ever more a common vision that it's necessary as well as worthwhile to accelerate our way towards a sustainable community. Businesses are following, local governments often hurry to embrace these initiatives and facilitate and support them. It not only generates renewable energy but also lots of social energy. That's hopeful. And more is sure to follow.

2. Circular Economy

The current prevailing system of our economy is a linear one: Take resources, Manufacture products, Use products, Discard products and thus lose most resources. Everybody will realise this system is not sustainable. On the contrary, it is a dead end. Innovative technologies will only be able to extend the final depletion by some time, but not prevent it from happening.

Thus we have to rapidly make the change from a linear to a circular economy, in which resources will be recycled and re-used. Everywhere one already can see this happening, albeit that the mainstream still is a linear system.

The transformation towards a circular economy will be greatly strengthened by the actual realisation of the well-known principle 'polluter pays', be it a tax on CO₂ emissions, water and air pollution or anything else which pollutes the environment or waste the scarce natural

If you wish to change the world, start with taxation.

Sustainable Society Foundation

www.ssfindex.com – info@ssfindex.com – www.gdindex.nl

resources. This will support the re-use of products, will stimulate the use of all kinds of renewables and will make biologically produced products at least competitive, if not cheaper than 'traditionally' produced goods.

3. Redevelop the financial system

The financial system is not meant to be a system in itself: originally it has been developed to facilitate people's lives, the production of goods, trade etc. Nowadays we painfully experience that the system has grown into a completely different way. The needs and interests of the people play second fiddle. Profit making has become the major – and maybe sometimes even the only – goal. This persuades people to go on with consumption in every possible way and keeps them away from efforts to achieve a sustainable world.

We'll have to give back the financial system to the public and redevelop it so that it will serve society.

4. Re-establish the power of civil society above the power of global firms and lobbyists

Monsanto's law in Ghana

The proposed legislation contains rules that would restrict farmers from an age-old practice: freely saving, swapping and breeding seeds they rely on. Under the laws, farmers that use seed varieties claimed under new intellectual property rights by individuals and companies anywhere in the world, risk hefty fines or even imprisonment.

Autumn 2014

We – at least many of us – have a strong focus on materialism: buy the latest gadgets, don't repair the vacuum cleaner etc. Why? One of the main reasons might well be the enormous power of advertising by big firms. But not only that, multinational firms have the power to persuade governments to take measures in their favour, but contrary to the public interests.

Consumers are powerful. They can break the power of firms and direct them towards sustainability. They should not hesitate to use this power.

Inclusiveness

These four important goals will all support and achieve inclusiveness, i.e. no living human being will be excluded from the society in which he or she is living. Inclusiveness is a very strong means for empowerment of societies and for the achievement of solidarity among people of present generations and with generations to come. And for respect and care for the planet's ecosystem. We've got only one!

This requires a change of mind and behaviour of people. To change human behaviour might well be one of the toughest challenges. But it can be done. It requires continuous information of the public at large to further raise sufficient awareness and the feeling of urgency: storytelling, information and education are crucial factors in this process. In many places around the world strong local communities already

This means choosing a path of sustainable development, restructuring the global financial system in line with people's needs, and responding urgently to the challenge of human-induced climate change.

Ban Ki-Moon, 2015

exist or are being built, where people make sure nobody is to struggle at his or her own and where people live in harmony with the environment. If we really wish to survive, we need to build an inclusive society, or many inclusive societies, all over the world.

Wellbeing

Looking at the three wellbeing dimensions – Human, Environmental and Economic Wellbeing – in more detail, we can define some priorities of what should be done.

1. Human wellbeing

First of all one has to give priority to the fulfilment of **Basic Needs**: sufficient food for everybody, safe drinking water and safe sanitation facilities. Nowadays, over 800 million people still lack sufficient food and safe drinking water; 2.5 billion people have no access to safe sanitation facilities and thus are continuously exposed to diseases.

Two approaches will highly contribute to meet the basic needs: Education and Gender Equality. Both have proven to have a positive impact, not only on Basic Needs, but also on a decrease of Population Growth.

The investment in education, especially of women, delivers the best return.

World Bank

Population size is not a main issue in itself. The earth has enough capacity to feed a much larger population than we have nowadays, provided we are willing to change our 'food consumption mix', in particular eat less meat. And, even more important, to ensure the distribution of available food and the ability of people to buy it. Today we have lost the power and the ability to adequately solve distribution problems at international and global scale.

Another possible threat to our society is an unequal income (and wealth) distribution. Though nobody exactly knows where the limits are, history learns that when the income inequality is too high, it will provoke social unrest and possibly more than that.

2. Environmental wellbeing

The problem of the 'depletion of natural resources' must be resolved by the transformation to a circular economy. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to ensure a fair distribution of the natural resources, to avoid regional or global conflicts. Alongside this transformation, high priority has to be given to a rapid and robust reduction of Greenhouse Gases and the simultaneous production of renewable energy and to safeguarding and strengthening the worldwide Biodiversity.

3. Economic wellbeing

To achieve a high level of Human and Environmental wellbeing a reasonable level of Economic Wellbeing is required: a reasonable income for everybody to be able to meet their basic needs. Moreover, it requires a world with a low level of unemployment. That means we will move to a more equal distribution of work and workload.

An income over \$ 40,000 per person doesn't contribute to higher level of wellbeing.

UN Development Programme 2007

Countries need to decrease the often high levels of Public Debt as % of their National income, to be able to make their own decisions as to the allocation of expenditures.

Future society

Can we envisage how the future society will look like? Not really. One thing is for certain: it will be different from the past and different from what we expect today. Developments are too diverse, too radical and too unexpected and dynamic, to allow a more or less reliable forecast. Nevertheless, as far as we can see now, some characteristics might be:

- an inclusive society. If not, there will be no liveable society left.
- a society primarily organised at a smaller scale. If not, people will completely lose control.
- a society with a taxation system that penalizes unsustainable behaviour.
- a society with more equal income distribution. If not, social unrest, transmigration and conflicts will continue.
- a society with a more equal distribution of workload and working hours. If not, on the one hand we will face high unemployment figures and on the other hand continuous stress.

Global Governance

How are we going to govern our changing world? This is a very important question. Nevertheless I am not the one to give a sound answer, since it is way beyond my expertise.

We notice a number of developments. On the one hand:

- The existence and further developing of local communities
- A 're-invention' of the values of organising at small scale
- Movements to more autonomy at regional level

and on the other hand the necessity of global cooperation, 'management' of global conflicts, global trade flows, global responsibility for a liveable and sustainable world.

To address these developments one may need a much improved and strengthened global governance system, based on new and future political, economic and demographic circumstances. Not on decisions in the past. The borders between countries may become quite different from what we are used to nowadays. They might develop in a more organic way, taking into account cultural and social cohesion.

A major task for a new global governance system will be to facilitate and even to ensure a fair distribution of scarce natural resources, above all fresh water.

Finally

Are we able to cope with these challenges? We'll have to. And I believe we can, if only we definitely wish to do so. Most important in this view is reliable and continuous information of the public at large. It all boils down to mobilize the power of people, to support and extend the many initiatives that are being taken world-wide by people on the way to sustainability. And also, to push our politicians in the right directions.

Of course the way to the desired results will not be a smooth one nor a straight line. It is tempting to contemplate all the difficulties we may face en route. But we should not let this prevent us to at least start now in the right direction.

Acknowledgements

This article has been written after discussions with **Professor Klaas van Egmond** (Utrecht University) and **Professor Herman Wijffels** (Utrecht University). I am thankful for their valuable contributions and inspiring ideas.

Wageningen, February 14th, 2015

Geurt van de Kerk