

The Way Forward – A Systems View of the World

Some people have been working away at linking COVID-19 with climate change. Of course, it would be a long-shot to link the two in any causal way. But if we were to think in terms of systems – biological systems and human created systems – rather than isolating one particular aspect of our environment for analysis there are connections. We are beginning to see the emergence of a kind of thinking that, while not new, is seriously neglected: a systems view of the world. In this view, everything is linked in some way – because everything is a part of a huge complex system and of equally complex sub-systems – from the stars to the virus, from the cosmos to the atom. Sally McFague says it well: “Never before have we had to think of everyone and everything all together”¹.

We continue to regard human well-being as measurable entirely in terms of material prosperity (most usually expressed as GDP per capita – a seriously flawed measure at the best of times) while the well-being of the environment is considered only in the economic terms of its amenity for our use – 'ecological services'. The dominant cultural values of competition, survival of the individual in a competitive social and economic environment, status among peers that is centred on material possessions, an un-moderated instinct towards acquiring, consuming and greed – these are in direct opposition to Gospel values: compassion, hospitality, generous giving, care for the vulnerable and 'outsiders'.

Recent work by The Commission for the Human Future suggests there are ten catastrophic risks facing human-kind. (A catastrophic risk is one that menaces civilisation in general.) The Commission's report says: “The systemic character of our problem is not well or widely understood.”² The current global health crisis offers an opportunity, unlike anything we have experienced in decades, to rethink our society and the way we impact our planets systems from the oceans to the cryosphere, from soils to atmosphere. If we were to maintain conventional priorities, in particular political and economic ideologies, and ignore the risks we would be gambling with the future of the human race.

In a recent presentation Johan Rockström, Director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, linked the health crisis, the climate crisis and the ecosystem crisis. Health, and in particular, the advent and spread of zoonotic diseases (such as swine flu, avian flu, COVID-19) is inextricably tied to ecological sustainability which is impacted by the destabilising impact of climate change (extreme weather, biome destabilisation). Unless we think in terms of systems and their interactions with one another we won't even get near solving the problems that are presenting themselves ever more rapidly.³

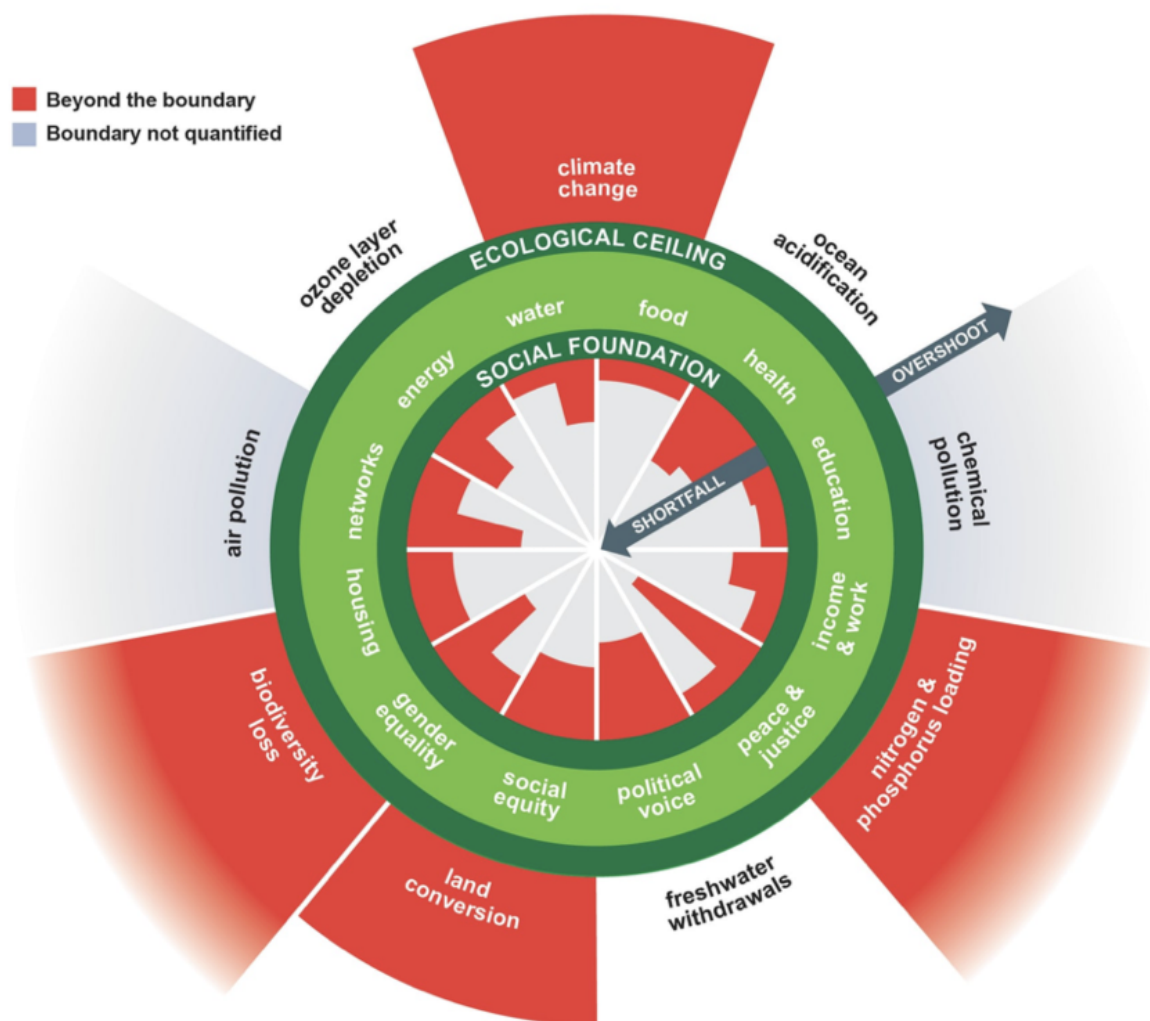
¹ Sally McFague (2002) *Life Abundant: Rethinking theology and economy for a planet in peril* (Mineapolis: Augsburg Fortress) Page xiv Quoted in: UCA Assembly (2009) *An Economy of Life: Re-imagining human progress* <https://www.unitingjustice.org.au/just-and-sustainable-economy/uca-statements/item/461-an-economy-of-life-re-imagining-human-progress-for-a-flourishing-world> (accessed 27/04/2020)

² Commission for the Human Future (2020) http://humansforsurvival.org/sites/default/files/CHF_Roundtable_Report_March_2020.pdf (Accessed 27/04/2020) p.14

³ Johan Rockström (2020) *Towards a healthy and climate resilient planet* Webcast (3:04:30 to 3:21:07) available at https://www.wedonthavetime.org/earthdayweek/big-ideas-and-education?utm_source=sendinblue&utm_campaign=2020_Earth_Day_Week_-_Daily_Email_Wednesday_April_22&utm_medium=email (Accessed 27/04/2020)

Thinking with a systems approach does not come easily to us. We are good at solving problems – one at a time. The problems confronting us now as a civilisation are linked in such a way that simple problem solving is no longer possible. We tackle one thing only to find that our solution is having a negative impact somewhere else. Adding to our difficulties, we are only just beginning to acknowledge and understand the complex systems that operate in our immediate environment and sustain our life.

Economist Kate Haworth has developed a visual representation of the challenges we face in her book *Doughnut Economics*⁴. (The diagram is the clue to why it has been given this title.)



For sustainability and equity we have to live within the dough of the doughnut. The hole in the centre represents the global shortfalls relating to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The area outside the doughnut represents our ecological overshoot. The threats to our future well-being lie both inside and outside. They each form one part of the whole picture. To address these threats all parts of the system need to be taken into consideration. None exist in isolation.

It is interesting to note that the city of Amsterdam is planning its post-COVID-19 response using this concept developed by Kate Haworth. A city official is quoted as saying “The doughnut does not bring us the answers but a way of looking at it, so that we don’t keep on going on in the same

⁴ Kate Haworth (2018) *Doughnut Economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st century economist* (Cornerstone) Also available as an eBook.

structures as we used to.”⁵ The global obsession with economic growth and the 'market' will no longer be the motivation behind this city's recovery. It would be so tempting to fall back into the same old lazy mechanisms. When the goal of economic activity is required to meet the core needs of all, within the means of the planet and when attention is turned to climate, health, jobs, housing and communities, the standard economic models and outdated lazy thinking will simply not do. It is precisely these that have, for several decades, been leading us into the current disaster zone.

Returning to the Commission for the Future of Humanity round-table report:

For humanity to survive and thrive we need a natural world that is capable of sustaining not only humans, but all the other species, habitats and ecosystems which support life on our Planet.

It adds:

Our present monetary and economic systems are in conflict with this need – indeed they rely on the over-exploitation of increasingly scarce resources such as water, soil, forests, oceans, fish and biodiversity generally.⁶

Arundhati Roy speaks to us with concise clarity. This current pandemic forces us to break with the past and imagine our world anew.

It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.⁷

In a recent newsletter from *Common Grace*, ethicist Byron Smith also quotes Arundhati Roy:

"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." In the light of the resurrection, Smith adds, "Destruction, defeat and despair are not inevitable... Take action through courageous *hope*".⁸ Another world *is* on its way!

Jesus said: 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' Wake up! Let us open our eyes and regard the beautiful planet that is so sorely threatened by our actions and let us resolve to work together in hope to bring into being the world which, in our inner most hearts, we long to live in.

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27/04/2020

⁵ Cristy Clark *Eureka Street* https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/when-normal-returns--what-do-we-want-it-to-be?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Thursday%209%20April%202020&utm_content=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Thursday%209%20April%202020+CID_f17d035bd6f369fe7321f80eb846ced0&utm_source=Jescom%20Newsletters&utm_term=READ%20MORE (accessed 11/04/2020)

⁶ Commission for the Human Future (2020) p. 17

⁷ See: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> (accessed 24/04/2020)

⁸ https://www.commongrace.org.au/daily_disruptions_climate_hoping