
MY PRIORITY FOR THE DEFINING YEAR OF HUMANITY'S DEFINING DECADE

David Korten, February 11, 2020

My most [recent YES! column](#) identified 2020 as the defining year of a defining decade for humanity. The scientific data suggest it is our last opportunity to get in place the necessary measures to meet essential carbon emission reduction targets. This immediate and nonnegotiable imperative for human wellbeing, even survival, is a consequence of profound economic failure that traces to deeply flawed economic theory.

The global awakening to this failure and the related imperative for deep change creates an epic opportunity to transition to a new civilization dedicated to securing the wellbeing of people and planet. Successful navigation of this transition will require replacing the deeply flawed economics that has shaped human relationships with one another and Earth since the mid-20th century with a 21st century economics built on a foundation of 21st century science, the wisdom of indigenous peoples, and the moral principles of the world's religions.

2019: Learning and Connecting

For me, 2019 was a year of learning and connecting as I renewed and deepened relationships developed over the past 50 years. Defining experiences included meetings with thought leaders in China and South Africa and engagements with the Club of Rome (CoR); the Parliament of the World's Religions; the Academy of Management; organizations of the Claremont EcoCiv alliance; a Fordham University based Vatican initiative to transform management and economics education in the world's Jesuit universities; the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEALL) that includes members shaping government economic policies in New Zealand, Iceland, and Scotland; a radical feminist initiative called An Economy of Our Own; and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives.

Each advanced my thinking and engagement while presenting opportunities to connect and shape the thinking of key players in the unfolding effort to save humanity from itself. What I learned from Club of Rome discussions and my visits to China and South Africa bears special mention.

The Club of Rome

The CoR was once a virtually all-male organization. In 2018 its members elected two women co-presidents. They immediately set about to strengthen and clarify the organization's priorities and restore its once significant contribution to the global dialogue on humanity's defining challenges.

The CoR is now focused on two primary initiatives. The first is a Planetary Emergency Initiative led by Co-president Sandrine Dixon-Decleve, who has significant connections and influence with European Union leadership on action to achieve the carbon emissions reduction essential to human survival. The second is an Emerging New Civilization Initiative led by Co-president Mamphela Ramphele, a revered leader of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement and co-founder of

Reimagine South Africa. This initiative seeks a future that brings humans into co-productive balance with the regenerative systems of a living Earth while securing material sufficiency and creative opportunity for all.

Both initiatives build on longtime CoR commitments. The success of each ultimately depends on the success of the other. Yet treating them as initially separate is a breakthrough strategic move because they involve quite different short-term priorities that can be properly addressed only by giving each the distinctive attention it requires. The Club of Rome 2019 meeting in Cape Town provided opportunity for extended exchanges with both Sandrine and Mamphela that deepened my appreciation for the logic of the separation.

Rapidly unfolding environmental and social collapse provides a dramatic demonstration of the existential failure of existing economic institutions and theory. Yet decisive climate action cannot wait for the new economics or the for the systemic transformation of culture, institutions, technology, infrastructure that a civilizational transformation will require.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that to keep the global temperature increase below the target of 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit, we must reduce carbon emissions by 45 percent by 2030 and 100 percent by 2050. Decisive action must begin immediately using existing policy tools implemented through existing institutions. The Planetary Emergency Initiative focuses on that task.

The longer term need for civilizational transformation will require far deeper, more complex, and less understood system changes and ways of thinking, including a new economics. Though still embryonic, serious discussion of what the deeper transformation will require is now underway. That a great many people are joining in gives me hope for the human future.

China

For several years, I've been inspired by China's visionary commitment to an ecological civilization now enshrined in both its national and Communist Party constitutions. My recent visit to China was deeply sobering, however, as it raised troubling questions about the seriousness of that commitment.

The visit began with a private lunch with Minister Pan Yue, who holds the rank of Full Minister in China's Communist Party, in his official dining room in the Central Academy of Socialism in Beijing. He is widely considered to be China's leading environmental advocate and a primary architect of China's commitment to an Ecological Civilization.

I knew from my web research that Minister Pan once held a position in China's Ministry of the Environment from which he shaped China's environmental policy in ways that challenged powerful economic interests. In response to political pressure the Communist Party raised his rank and assigned him to a new post that stripped him of authority over environmental policy.

None of this was mentioned over our lunch. Rather we shared thoughts on the great challenges facing humanity, the importance of the human transition to an Ecological Civilization, and the need to describe more clearly what that transition will require. I found Minister Pan's intelligence and dedication to be as extraordinary as his generous and elegant hospitality.

The primary invitation that took me to China was to give a plenary presentation at an international conference in Wulong, a natural wonder site and major Chinese tourist destination. I focused my presentation on the reasons why GDP growth inevitably drives devastating inequality and environmental destruction—thus creating an irreconcilable conflict with the priorities of an Ecological Civilization. My intention was to celebrate, affirm, and serve the transition to an Ecological Civilization that I understood to be China’s defining policy commitment.

I began to suspect I might be over-estimating that commitment when I realized that other conference speakers and discussants—especially those of Chinese nationality—rarely if ever uttered the words Ecological Civilization. It seemed that most all embraced economic growth as a defining priority supported by what many referred to as “The Two Mountains Theory.” I initially had no idea what the two mountains referred to, but the references implied that China seeks to climb both simultaneously.

As eventually explained to me, the Two Mountains theory comes from the words of China’s President Xi Jinping. The first mountain is economic growth. The second mountain is care for the environment. They together define China’s economic priorities—two mountains to be climbed simultaneously. At least that is how I interpreted what I heard and how most Chinese with whom I discussed the theory seemed to understand it. I had intended to affirm what I had understood to be official policy. Perhaps I had instead unintentionally directly challenged it. Not a wise thing to do in China.

Yet my presentation was received with an enthusiasm far beyond my expectation and there was no mention of any conflict with official policy. I was given VIP treatment throughout my visit and given a high rank in the individually assigned conference seating. I concluded that as a foreigner perhaps I was able to say what many of those present believe—but dare not say.

I now understand that the Two Mountains Theory originates from President Xi’s repeated references to lucid waters and lush mountains as assets more valuable than gold and silver. He commonly follows with the observation that a healthy environment is a valuable economic asset—a source of silver and gold.

A superficial interpretation reduces the Two Mountain Theory to the equivalent of what neoliberal economists call “sustainable development”—a term they use to assure the public that, with some modest environmental protection, there are no natural limits to growing GDP.

In studying more carefully the English translations of President’s Xi’s references to the importance of a healthy natural environment, it seems his intention is to communicate a far deeper meaning. Rather than suggesting that China or the world climb two mountains simultaneously, he is saying that care for Earth will lead to the real wealth of good health and natural beauty we truly seek.

If this is a correct interpretation, President Xi is not calling the Chinese people to climb two mountains simultaneously. He is calling on them to make a clear and conscious choice for the true wealth of healthy rivers and beautiful mountains lush with life on which human wellbeing depends. Yet, as do most nations, China assesses its economic performance by the rate of growth of its GDP. This creates an irreconcilable conflict. A growing GDP may create new jobs and put an upward pressure on wages. Its primary and most certain consequence, however, is to grow inequality and the fortunes of billionaires through the exploitation of people and nature.

These are consequences wholly counter to the professed commitments of President Xi and the Chinese Communist Party. The result is an understandable confusion on the part of those responsible for implementing national priorities created by China's continuing obsession with GDP as its defining measure of economic performance. If the wellbeing of people and Earth is indeed China's official priority, then it best eliminate the ambiguity by joining New Zealand, Iceland, and Scotland in replacing GDP with indicators of the wellbeing of people and planet as the basis for evaluating economic performance.

South Africa

It is Mamphela Ramphele's dream that Mother Africa might build on its legacy as the birthplace of humanity to also become the birthplace of a new civilization. With this dream in mind, she invited the Club of Rome to hold its 2019 annual global gathering in Cape Town in the hope that the discussions might help inspire her African colleagues to rise to the challenge.

Her knowledge of my work led her to recruit me to deliver the meeting's plenary address framing a new economics for a new civilization. She also arranged for me to stay on for further presentations and discussions with her South African colleagues in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Discussions of a civilizational transition have yet to gain traction in South Africa, but the individuals and groups I encountered were ready and eager to explore the possibility. The experience awakened me to what Africa's distinctive contribution might be.

Meeting human needs in a balanced relationship with a finite living Earth will require strong local self-organization within self-reliant living communities. Modern societies have largely forgotten how to structure and manage such relationships. The West's colonization of Africa and its subsequent promotion of economic development defined by the flawed theories of neoliberal economics wrought enormous damage to the African people by separating them from one another and the land. It was a pattern repeated throughout much of the world.

Compared to most of the world's people, however, indigenous Africans remain relatively close to a past in which they lived for thousands of years in tribal communities in co-productive partnership with one another and Earth. Though these communities might sometimes war with one another, for millennia most maintained ways of working together with one another and nature within their own communities that were far more cooperative, peaceful, and egalitarian than the typical modern experience. It may not be too late for Africans to reclaim and apply valuable lessons of this earlier experience while adding beneficial contemporary science and technology to put themselves at the forefront of humanity's civilizational transition.

South Africa, with its strong connection to Africa's traditional roots, its relative political freedom, its desire to bridge its social divisions, and its mastery of modern communications technologies, may be in a strong position to engage this process of reclaiming and applying this ancient wisdom. South Africa's truly multi-racial/multi-cultural population and evident freedom of speech can be valuable assets for the creative processes that the transition to a new civilization will require. Leading that transition could be an opportunity for black Africans to renew their pride in their ancestry while simultaneously providing an essential service to a world placed in dire peril by the reckless separation of people from one another and nature.

A related lesson from South Africa came from the visits Fran, my life partner and wife, and I made to two extraordinary museums: The Cradle of Humankind Museum outside of Johannesburg and

the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. The Cradle of Humankind Museum curates the geological record of pre-human and human species spanning some 6 million years. The Apartheid Museum curates pre-colonial and colonial precursors of South Africa's apartheid experience and places it within a larger frame of global violence and oppression. These museums documented an aspect of the human experience I had not previously seen so clearly.

Humans ultimately depend on Earth's finite supply of productive lands for our food and water, to process our wastes and to provide space and materials for our shelter. Since the earliest emergence of homo sapiens, people worked out who had rights to make what use of occupied lands. Much of the modern legal system deals specifically with allocating and litigating such rights.

Human history records a constant and growing competition between individuals, families, tribes, city states, and ultimately nation states and corporations for control of Earth's finite supply of productive land. This competition is memorialized by the biblical story in Genesis of the competition for land between two sons of Adam that led Cain, the farmer, to kill his brother Abel, the shepherd. Since that biblical time, our numbers have increased many times, creating an ever more intense competition for land among humans and between humans and other species.

Throughout history, this competition drove human migration in search of new lands suitable for human habitation. The competition was constant, often violent, and led in recent years to great wars of conquest and occupation between heavily militarized nation states.

The museum exhibits were filled with stories of this competition. The resulting dynamics of violence and conquest often led those with power to force those who lacked power off the lands from which they once derived their living and into positions of servitude to those who displaced them. The resulting threat of invasion and death or servitude created a demand within individual groups to birth ever more warriors. This in turn increased the intensity and violence of the competition.

Related issues arise from the competition for living space between humans and other species. We are so used to competition for land that we easily overlook the possibilities for turning from competition to cooperation to create the conditions on which the wellbeing of people and nature depends.

We are learning that the species that survive and thrive in perpetuity ultimately bring their numbers into balance with their local environment while taking only what they need and finding their place of service in balanced relationship to the whole. Our human future depends on learning how we, as a now global species, can do the same.

I am not aware of any society that has come up with a peaceful, just and equitable way of balancing these needs and interests. The museums provided no exhibits suggesting the existence of such a society and I don't recall ever hearing mention of one. The spreading failure of Earth's regenerative systems is displacing millions, potentially billions, of people from places where they and their ancestors lived for thousands of years. We now face ever greater urgency to learn to deal with this challenge peacefully and equitably. This presents one of the many challenges a 21st century economics for a 21st century civilization must address.

2020: A 21st Century Economics for a 21st Century Civilization

The most significant barriers to a civilizational transformation reside in the human mind. These include the mechanistic paradigm of Western science, the individualism of Western culture, and the intellectual and moral corruption of neoliberal economics. The fact that the major barriers have no existence outside the human mind doesn't mean the transformation will be easy, but mental frames can change quickly, and that transformation is underway.

The defining frame of contemporary science is in transition from a cosmology of mechanism to a cosmology of organism. The dominant Western values frame is shifting from an exclusive concern for individual rights to a deepening recognition that the interdependence of life means we bear a collective responsibility for the well-being of one another, including all the many members of Earth's community of life.

The neoliberal economics that maintains a hegemonic dominance in education, media, and economic policy, however, remains resolutely stuck in its mechanistic worldview, its denial of community, its refusal to consider the relevance of other disciplines, and its claim that because it reduces all values to money it is an objective values-free science. It assumes that money is the ultimate measure of wealth, growing GDP is the ultimate measure of economic performance, and we each best serve society by competing to maximize our personal income and consumption.

Every one of these assumptions is false, yet we educate our young to live by them and reinforce them constantly through public media. We find ourselves playing out a bold global experiment to discover the consequences of their application and now have a definitive result. The resulting system makes a few people very rich while denying our humanity, reducing most people to lives of servitude, destroying the regenerative systems of a living Earth on which all life depends, and driving humans to potential self-extinction.

As these results become increasingly evident, neoliberal economics is fast losing credibility with intellectuals of critical mind. Yet it holds sway in the public mind for lack of a credible alternative.

My priority for 2020 is to work with global partners on the development and implementation of a 21st century economics for a 21st century civilization. The following are some of the defining issues I believe a 21st century economics must address if we are to have a viable human future.

Prioritize Wellbeing

China is not alone in its need to choose which of two mountains it seeks to climb: the growing GDP mountain or the well-being mountain. Every country faces a similar choice.

The growing GDP mountain has a well-worn path extensively marked and mapped by neoliberal economics. The well-being mountain has faintly visible paths once traversed by indigenous people with small populations and modest needs that lacked the massive destructive powers of the global corporation and modern carbon energy technology. To climb the well-being mountain will require finding and marking new paths with the help of a new economics as we put into place the culture, institutions, technology, and infrastructure of a civilization supportive of the wellbeing of people and planet.

This new economics must recognize that life is inseparable from community and the processes by which living communities self-organize to create and maintain the conditions essential to the wellbeing of their members. The policies of 20th century economics disrupted community to grow the power of money and those who control it. The policies of 21st century economics will rebuild and empower living community to secure the well-being of all.

Beyond meeting basic material needs for food, water, and shelter, most people find that further contributions to their sense of wellbeing and happiness come more from their relationships with other people and nature than from increasing material consumption. At their best, these relationships build a sense of belonging and mutual caring. They also offer opportunities for service essential to our need for a sense of self-worth. Because of this need, having meaningful work holds an importance far beyond a paycheck. Think of the many hours many of us devote to volunteer work. Our paid work can and should be as meaningful as our volunteer work.

Focused on growing GDP as the economy's defining purpose, neoliberal economics fails even to acknowledge these essential elements of wellbeing, let alone value them. It assigns value only to paid labor and only at the market wage. Family and community relationships and service count for nothing. The resulting policies of neoliberal economics leave too many of us living alone and working alone, deprived of self-worth and an adequate means of livelihood.

Actively denying community, it is no surprise that neoliberal economics ignores the mutual benefits of sharing goods and power that healthy indigenous communities have long recognized as essential to their collective wellbeing. Those communities educated their children in ways of cooperation and sharing developed over countless generations to secure the wellbeing of all. Commonly these included mutually understood rules for the sharing of one's labor and the gifting of one's surplus. They also had methods for collectively disciplining those who failed to honor the rules, including collective shaming and even banishment, which could be the equivalent of a death sentence.

It is instructive that humanity is in deep trouble specifically because of our common embrace of an economic ideology that celebrates individual greed in disregard of the consequence for others. So long as societies embrace GDP growth as their defining economic priority, growth will be the explicit goal and the flawed assumptions of 20th century economics will hold sway. Society will value money over life; empower corporations over communities; and reward the psychopath over the caretaker.

We are now awakening to the reality that by abandoning the living community on which our wellbeing depends, we have reduced ourselves to a lonely daily struggle for survival in servitude to an economy devoted to growing the power and financial statements of the world's already richest people. To escape from our self-entrapment, we must rebuild community and repurpose money.

Repurpose Money

For thousands of years humans shared power as self-reliant, self-organizing communities united by mutual dependence and caring with no need for money. The further separated they became from the lands from which they together had for countless generations met their mutual needs for food, water, energy, and shelter, the more they turned to money as a substitute for the mutual obligations that previously united them.

For a time, it felt like freedom from the mutual obligations that come with community life. But it also meant abandoning the caring relationships on which the wellbeing of life depends. Focused on money we became captive to the illusion that value resides in money. We forgot that money's value resides in the products of life's labor that we agree to exchange for money. So long as we remain captive to the illusion, we fail to notice that as we destroy life to make money, we are growing collectively poorer on a path to ultimate self-extinction.

As relationships of mutual caring and cooperation were monetized, power that once was shared among those dedicated to the common good, became ever more concentrated and centralized in the hands of those who seek personal gain at community expense. First come the bankers who create money by loaning it into existence in return for a promise to repay with interest money the banker created from nothing. Next come the speculators who borrow from the bankers to game financial markets to profit from financial bubbles. The bankers and speculators both reap profits that give them ever greater control of the declining pool of real wealth while producing nothing of actual value in return.

The loans can be repaid with interest only if GDP and the financial bubbles continue growing to generate demand for enough new loans to pay the principle and interest due on loans outstanding. Lacking that growth, borrowers are forced into default, banks close, money disappears, the economy collapses, government is forced to bail out the bankers, and the cycle repeats. It is a system designed to benefit private bankers and speculators in total disregard of the wellbeing of people and planet.

The ability to create new money is the ability to create unearned buying power. Money is a purely human creation with no existence outside the human mind. We have no reason to create it except to serve the common good. Hence its creation should always be a transparent public function accountable to the community it is intended to serve.

It defies reason to assume that society benefits from giving this power to privately owned, for-profit banks dedicated to maximizing their own profits in disregard of community consequences. It makes even less sense to give this power to transnational banks with no loyalty or accountability to any country or community.

The more unequal the society and the more relationships are monetized, the more serious the financial dysfunction becomes. Under conditions of significant inequality, the poor are forced into ever deeper debt to obtain the basics of living. What money they have thus flows to the rich who are eager to earn interest on money for which they have no personal need.

An economics for the 21st century will teach that money is a number that has value only because we accept it in exchange for the things of real value—mostly things that living beings have created through their labor. It will teach that:

1. Caring relationships are more valuable than relationships based on financial exchange.
2. Money should be created by government and spent into circulation to fund public services and infrastructure.
3. A lack of money should never be a society's defining constraint because national governments can create it with a computer key stroke.
4. Financial speculation serves no beneficial purpose and should be prohibited.

With these lessons in mind, we will reduce our dependence of money as we rebuild the caring relationships of community essential to the wellbeing of people and planet.

Redefine Gender

Rebuilding the caring relationships of community life will require taking the issue of gender equality far beyond a demand for equal pay for equal work. The long-term well-being of people and nature requires reversing the process of monetizing relationships. To achieve that with the gender equity that current times and justice demand, gender roles will need to be redefined.

In traditional societies males and females had distinctive community roles shaped by their distinctive biological functions. Because women birthed and breastfed the children, they naturally assumed roles as the primary caretakers of the family and managers of the household. Men assumed roles as defenders and hunters that might require journeys far from home.

Men bonded the other men on whom their success in battle or on the hunt depended. Women bonded with the other women in the place-based communities in which they shared the duties of childcare, gathering food from nature's gardens, and preparing meals. Dependence on an individual partner of the opposite gender was more limited than in more recent times.

Colonization and economic development disrupted the direct relationships members of traditional communities previously had with one another and the land. As we separated from the land, households and communities became less self-reliant. As money intermediated ever more of our relationships, we yielded ever more power to those to whom we sold our labor in return for the money they in turn demanded in return for food and other essentials of living.

For a time, women continued in their roles as caretakers of the household while men ventured out to obtain the money required to fund a household budget adequate to the family's needs. Women became dependent on a male partner for that income—usually obtainable from a single job. Dependence on the relationships of a caring community declined for both men and women.

Most individual jobs now pay too little to maintain a household. As the economic system forces both men and women to devote ever more of their waking hours to paid employment to maintain their household, gender roles blur in historically unprecedented ways. Many of the family and community relationships essential to our wellbeing and to the emotional health and development of our children have disintegrated. Home care—including childcare—is either neglected or purchased in the market.

Calls for equal pay for women and men and for a government guaranteed basic income and/or government funded child and elder care may have their place. But they do not address our essential needs for deep and enduring relationships of mutual love and caring.

On a related issue, healthy families and communities still require both protectors and caretakers. The assignment of these roles need not be determined by one's birth gender, and family can be redefined. But wellbeing suffers when these roles are not balanced, integrated, and based on mutual caring. These issues require deep, thoughtful, and honest discussion. The needed new economics for the 21st century must guide us in framing and engaging that discussion.

Align the System

We are a species with a distinctive ability to choose a purpose beyond our basic material needs and then to create systems that shape our relationships with one another and nature accordingly. This involves collective choices relating to four key societal system elements: cultural beliefs and values; institutions (including government, law, money, and corporations); technology; and infrastructure (including buildings). These collective choices create system structures that limit our individual choices. When we get them wrong, they can strip us of our humanity and ability to fulfill our moral responsibility to society, our neighbors, and our family.

These structures determine who has power and opportunity, who has ready access to a good education and a means of living, who has a voice, and who has access to relevant information. They also determine the extent of our personal choices relating to such issues as climate change. On climate change, for example, if you live in Manhattan in New York City you can probably meet most needs by walking or public transportation. If you live in Amsterdam, you can probably cycle. If you live in Houston, you have a car or stay at home and order online—with all the related implications for shipping and packaging and for extracting money and jobs from the local economy.

Of the four structural elements, culture and institutions are constructs of the human mind potentially subject to rapid change. In stark contrast, technology and infrastructure are physical and durable. Changing them on a societal scale can require massive commitment and investment of labor and material resources.

A 21st century economics must guide us in using our collective decision power to create system structures that support individual choices consistent with the wellbeing of people and nature. An economics adequate to that task will differ in nearly every respect from the economics that currently shapes our choices. Life will be its defining value. The wellbeing of people and nature will be its defining goal. Community will be its defining unit of organization. Participation in its framing will be an open, reality based public process devoted to learning from practical experience, all branches of science, timeless religious values, and the wisdom of indigenous peoples.

In my various conversations, I find a readiness to engage in deeper and more systemic explorations of these and other foundational issues than I've ever previously experienced. This reflects a growing recognition of the need for truly dramatic change if we are to have a viable human future. I find that recognition a source of hope and inspiration.

The lack of a credible alternative to a deeply flawed 20th century economics poses a formidable barrier to navigating the essential civilizational transformation. My defining priority for 2020 is to contribute in whatever way I can to the framing and application of a 21st century economics.

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