



Change the World by Changing “Economics”

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Abstract

We live in a world of opportunity – the opportunity to use the insight generated through the multiple crises humanity finds itself in to transit into a much more liveable, sustainable and equitable society.

A paradigm change seems to be taking place, a movement for change seems to be in the making, but at the same time there is a widespread feeling that things are getting worse instead of better and there is no guarantee that change will lead us into a better future in the next few decades.

To effectively guide the direction of change we need to address the root causes of today’s global challenges and take a close look at what drives human society and human beings. In doing so we realize that we are looking at a holographic picture which contains different layers, which are interdependent: Human biology; values and belief systems; the changing narrative underlying the development of human society; economics and governance and the many tools as well as special interests, support and uphold the outdated paradigms.

The one element which influences all people nearly every day and is behind just about each and every crisis is the theory and practice of current economics. The article explores the debate on current economics and proposes mechanisms of change.

1. Introduction

We live in one of the most dynamic and important periods of change humanity might have ever seen. A time of fundamental change comparable with the change from a hunter and gatherer society to an agricultural society, the change from a feudal society to a democratic society or the change from an agricultural society to an industrial and technology-driven society. What is different in these periods of change are the speed and the geographical scope.

But we also live in a time of multiple crises and negative developments and trends. Unemployment, inequality, the financial crisis, biodiversity depletion, and degradation of ecosystems, climate change – you name it, we have it. There is a growing feeling amongst civil society representatives, foundations and citizens from all walks of life that we are winning skirmishes and battles, but losing the war in our strife for a sustainable, equitable and just world – despite the multitude of positive initiatives and the billions spent on good causes. Or at least, light at the end of the tunnel doesn’t seem to be appearing yet.

The reasons for this feeling are manifold but lie certainly in our current inability to address the roots of the problem. Even thinking about fundamental approaches is not encouraged. The debate constantly revolves around “what goes wrong” and “where we should be” and ignores the crucial question: “How are we going to get there?”

“The various challenges humanity faces are in fact aspects of a systemic crisis, which to a large degree is related to our current economic theory and practice and our underlying values and belief system.”

This short paper is the result of a process that I was asked to guide by a couple of foundations that were not satisfied anymore with winning small battles alone. Their question was: “If we are really serious about winning the war, what is it that we should do?”

Few dare to even ask such fundamental questions, as those who ask them tend to be regarded as victims of their own hubris or as outright crazy. However, this key question should be explored and addressed without taboos on a broad scale, foremost by civil society organizations, many of which believe and claim that they do this anyway, but looking closer reveals they rarely do so.

It is becoming more and more evident that the various challenges humanity faces are in fact aspects of a systemic crisis, which to a large degree is related to our current economic theory and practice and our underlying values and belief system. If we want to change the world for the better we will have to find ways of addressing the real causes of this systemic crisis and we will probably have to be content that there is no “magic button”, no “silver bullet”, but plenty of “silver buckshot”.

What stops us from trying? For one it is evidently the magnitude of the task, as underlying root causes seem too fundamental, big, nebulous and fuzzy to tackle. But if the apparent complexity is our challenge, then why not try to find a way through this complexity, which allows us to identify clear and pragmatic lines of action, like trying to change the global economic system, which stands out as the key driver behind the global challenges we face?

A second key reason is directly linked to ourselves: Civil society, which should drive the process, has become sectoral and institutionalized to a certain degree. Instead of pursuing a vision for the world, it is increasingly absorbed in its own vision. And, let’s face it, we all are somehow caught in the system we want to change and opting out is not an easy undertaking. Being a hamster in a running wheel and having to go faster and faster just to remain in the same place have become widespread feelings, especially for the Western middle class. And for many, the sheer complexity of the world seems too much to digest, so they have stopped trying to make sense of it.

Those who benefit from the current system and do not want any change plus all those who are wedded to the old worldview and have difficulty finding a way out of it, effectively build a barrier for natural change to happen. They force humanity directly and indirectly to stay

on a detrimental course of rising inequality and looming social unrest, rising CO₂ concentrations, waste and depletion unless we, the concerned and committed citizens of this world, change this course.

The resulting brainwash is so subliminally intense, that it is difficult to free one's thinking to a degree that enables us to dream and realize a different and much better world in earnest. We are to a certain degree moving within the conceptual framework of systems that we know we need to change.

The bad developments are and seem to be massive and tend to block the view on all the positive aspects of development, which are as massive but differently structured and not that easy to spot in their entirety.

Hundreds of millions of people are engaged in making this world a better place. Everywhere around the world, groups of people try to prevent damage from occurring or helping those in need by healing. This is a web of life, largely invisible, stronger than one might think.¹ Consider the sheer number and the scope of initiatives for a world that works better in the long run for all humans. Still, the planet is staggering.

A movement is already in the making. Organized civil society might not be on the move (the smaller the organization the less powerful it is as institutionalization seems usually linked to size), but "ordinary" people certainly are powerful. Beliefs are changing in a big way; segments of a new "earth citizen" lifestyle are becoming part of everybody's life; paradigms are changing in front of us and if there weren't any special interests that profit from the way the world runs downhill we would already be in a different and more sustainable world.

The aim of this paper is to open a debate on how foundations, civil society and committed citizens can address the root causes of the global challenges facing humankind – moving from short-term thinking, acting and investing in sectors that are involved in long-term engagement on systemic issues and analysing consequences from root causes. Actually doing it will require a fresh approach, characterized by entrepreneurial spirit and the ability to take risks and to move outside the box of well-established programming and way of doing things.

We should all team up to create an exciting drive towards a transition into a sustainable and equitable world – one so exciting that artists, creative professionals, intellectuals, concerned citizens and movements engage in a peaceful revolution to create a sustainable, fair and equitable world. It will require cooperation and working together and also a return to a vision for the world as the main objective for civil society. And it will require personal commitments – no matter how small.

It is impossible to speak in general terms for all people and cultures across the world. China, India, Brazil and Russia, to name a few, are on a very different trajectory and experience their own paradigm change. However, the roots of the problem originate to a large degree from the economic thinking and practice developed, promoted and exported by the West and if we want to change things at the fundamental level, then it makes sense to go to where it all started. The West could be in a unique position to be a driver of change towards a sustainable and equitable future.

2. A Hologram

2.1. The Matrix

By looking at the systemic crisis and its causes we are in fact looking at human beings with all their complexities, intricacies, defaults, strengths and weaknesses and we are also looking at a human society that has evolved over thousands of years. Root causes, drivers, consequences and effects can be portrayed as a matrix of interconnected and interacting layers. At the very bottom we find the biological framing of our species, the hormone system, the intuitive level and the peculiarities of our brain, going back as far as the reptile brain.

The next level could be called our “cultural level”, where values and belief systems are located. This is the level that determines how human society is essentially structured and operates. Values and beliefs guide our lives, opinions, mechanisms and tools of society, but tend to be deeply hidden within our personality and our specific culture.

“One detrimental characteristic of both the political and economic systems is their current focus on short-term approaches, decisions and actions.”

Our main societal instruments, namely how we organize economic and political activity (mainly through various versions of capitalism and democracy) represent the next layer. One detrimental characteristic of both the political and economic systems is their current focus on short-term approaches, decisions and actions. We live, however, in a period of time where challenges are complex and require long-term and holistic answers instead of sectoral and short-term responses. So, we have created institutions and mechanisms which deliver the opposite of what is required.

A number of tools support these instruments and help keep the system on its course (quarterly financial reporting helps to maintain a focus on financial short-term profit, elections secure political short-termism) and often the debate addresses the tools instead of the underlying root causes.

This matrix produces partly positive results (lifting people out of poverty, the constant evolution of technology which would cover all our needs and wants), but to a large degree negative ones (with impacts ranging from inequality to fragmentation of communities and from plastic in the oceans to climate change).

One could argue endlessly about what kind of levels make up the human being or the human society, but this is not the point. All levels are interlinked and interdependent and function like a hologram, where each splinter of a picture contains the entire picture. If we want to address the root causes of the systemic crisis we will need to take this into consideration.

2.2. Values

Discussions about today’s problems and the challenges facing humankind or individuals, be they climate change, unemployment, financial crisis, destruction of nature, poverty,

crime or the way people interrelate and live together, turn rather quickly into a (unfortunately mostly superficial) debate about values. There is a general feeling that bankers and others in the financial and political worlds ought to live more by values and there is a growing sentiment that the absence of higher values is undermining the stability and viability of modern society, the welfare of human beings and the health of the environment.

Values are fundamental for humans. They represent the quintessential cumulative wisdom of humanity – the essential principles for survival, peace, harmony, development and human fulfilment. At the same time it seems nearly impossible to address them in any other but a banal or deeply philosophical way.

Values are the principles we use to guide our way through the possibilities and problems of life. They are the main drivers behind our societal instruments that shape the world we live in. Our theory and practice of economics do not rest on natural laws, but on our underlying values. It is our choice whether to have an unequal or equal society; it is not given by nature. It is our choice whether to build a world which can nurture and feed generations for hundreds of years. There is no natural law which compels us to overuse and deplete resources. It is our choice whether we want a world where billions live in poverty and where climate change already risks our grandchildren's future, where excessive individualism and narcissism reign instead of solidarity, caring and sharing.

It is our value-based choice which determines whether we live in a world of opportunities for all or in a world where only a few benefit from the riches of planet earth.

Values are often so subliminal that we never realise they are there until they either fall away or some crisis makes us question what values we lived by. Often the question about values ends up with earnest groups proposing codes of ethics. These often seem to hark back to a world of certainty and authority, which many feel they have left far behind.

Our present problems of unemployment, rising inequality, alienation, and social unrest can best be understood as a reflection of the insufficiency of prevailing values as they are being implemented in society. The increasing returns on speculative investment to the detriment of the real economy and employment make implicit value judgments that weigh the system towards the wealthy. This applies equally to the inordinate political power of the wealthy.

There is a growing recognition that the values guiding the course of our society are not the ones which can lead us into a better world. Some of the values we have lived by for many decades have led humanity straight into a world of separation, isolation, depletion and systemic crisis.

A sustainable and equitable society will not be possible if we cannot create a society built on fully recognizing the value of the human being – the most precious of all resources, the values of “respect” and “responsibility” for our family, our neighbour, our community, our fellow human beings, for other species and the wellbeing of life on this planet. These values will not arise as a result of codification (ethics or rules of conduct) but from the character

(ethos) of a culture or community. Business ethics for example is a list of rules and regulations which people might be inclined to follow if they have the right ethos.

2.3. Need for a New Narrative

Values are transmitted through many different media, through families, traditions and cultures in various ways – ranging from festivals to how the young are taught. As the human species is a story-telling species, myths, stories, narratives (the overarching purpose of stories being told) are the main transmission belts for values.

“The problems confronting us today are a human creation.”

The narrative humanity is living today is a fantasy that borders on illusion. It neglects serious challenges based on a blind faith in science and technology. It discounts the value of the human being and nature. It mesmerizes us with visions of unlimited consumption and opulence. While the world fantasizes, problems mount and threaten the stability, security and viability of society. The narrative we need is one which maximizes security, welfare and well-being of all human beings. It is a narrative that fully develops our individual and social potential while conserving the sacred inheritance nature has bestowed on us.

Converting this narrative into a compelling vision backed by facts and figures is one of the most essential steps needed to effect a radical change of course for humanity.

Narratives provide guidance for individuals as well as for communities, small or large. At the highest level they guide the development of human civilisation. “Progress” was a modern and powerful vision for the second half of the 20th century and it seems that while “progress” as a vision has largely disappeared, it has not been replaced with another emotionally inspiring and uplifting vision with the power to explain the world in simple terms and to provide direction for the development of human society. “A sustainable world” is largely a technological, intellectual concept, but not an emotional one. A global society is in the making, but people cannot feel it yet.

But there is a wave of fundamental change building up and it is made of the many small changes taking place. People are in fact developing their vision for their world and the powerful global vision we are missing might be emerging from countless personal, local and regional visions.

2.4. Belief Systems & Worldviews

Our narrative is a construction, which has numerous layers. It is a conglomerate of elements originating from different periods of historical, intellectual and social human development. Together, these layers determine how we, as individuals or as a group, view and understand the world.

There is nothing inevitable about where we are today. We could have told, and can choose a different story and therefore a different world. The laws governing economy are man-made. The problems confronting us today are a human creation. In order to change course and to

navigate a better world for humanity we need to understand the assumptions which have led us on our current course and correct them properly.

Today's dominant belief systems originated in the West during the period of enlightenment and have been influencing the rest of the world for many years. However, what started out as humanistic ideas with the well-being of the community in mind have been distorted over the last few centuries. We now find ourselves in a world where competition is more important than cooperation; where material values trump non-material ones; where caring for the community has been replaced by excessive individualism; and where "liberty" (originally the right of every human being to live according to his/her beliefs and opinions, as long as it did not harm or negatively impact on others) has turned into the freedom of overconsumption and selfishness.²

"Financial markets have become an end in themselves, increasingly divorced from their original intention, destabilizing and suppressing healthy economic growth."

The original thinking on which today's economy is based is 200 years old and comes from a time when "the market" was still the city market, where everybody knew everybody. Its underlying purpose was seen as improving the wellbeing of a maximum number of people and not the maximization of individual benefit and financial profit.

At that time few people lived on earth and the planet's resources seemed endless. No wonder that the value of natural resources was mainly seen in terms of extraction costs and sales profit.

Economy has now become the master narrative.³ This is basically the result of a several-decades-long effort by a rather small group of people, spearheaded by politicians such as Reagan and Thatcher in the 80s who were promoting the free market ideology, deregulation, privatization of the commons and egoistic values.

Today's economic worldview builds not only on false interpretations of economists like Smith, but also on an interpretation and simplification of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Competition is heralded as a key driver and "survival of the fittest" as nature's recipe to succeed and conquer. The capitalists of the Industrial Revolution readily took up this interpretation of Darwin's theory as it rationalized their inhuman behaviour towards workers as being normal and "natural".

However, a new and different belief and evidence have emerged these days that while "competition" is an important driver in evolution it is by far not the only one and maybe not the most decisive one. This probably is "cooperation". Imagine the consequences if the belief that competition is the only real driver of development were replaced by the belief that "cooperation" is the key driver or at least equal to "competition"! This change of narrative alone would have a major impact on business practices.

The values underlying the expansion of the finance industry, which seemed so sexy to many during the late 80s and 90s are now perceived as not only wrong and misleading, but also as obscene and damaging to society as a whole. Modern economic dogma disregards the fact that financial markets developed during the Industrial Revolution to support the growth of the real economy, employment and real wealth generation at a time when enormous capital investment required the pooling of resources. Today, financial markets have become an end in themselves, increasingly divorced from their original intention, destabilizing and suppressing healthy economic growth.

“Both world wars have served as tipping points for the creation of international institutions.”

Despite the negative trends of the last few decades, we are seeing positive signs of movement in a new direction: a move from competition to cooperation; from a purely materialistic worldview to one which is linked more on a spiritual level; from a life defined by an unhealthy living standard to a life of well-being. The various initiatives and the number of intellectuals and philosophers exploring a new paradigm might be small, but they likely already represent an “elite”, which will trigger broader change.

3. Change

3.1. *A Short Theory of Change*

When asked how he went bankrupt, Ernest Hemingway famously replied “First gradually, and then suddenly”. This is an apt expression of how change tends to happen. Yesterday there was no sign of anything moving and today the revolution is on. Change happens first gradually and then suddenly, following often the dynamics of exponential growth. As with population growth, for a long time the build-up is not visible and cannot be noticed. The curve runs more or less in parallel to the line at the bottom. Then suddenly the curve goes upward, getting steeper and steeper, until it crosses a tipping point.

What happens is the build-up of a critical mass. This build-up is not visible before the mass “explodes”. It can be anticipated, but cannot be foreseen in detail (some people can to an amazing degree).

A consequence of this dynamics is that big changes tend to be an accumulation of small changes. Furthermore, it is valid to say that if I change my world (by changing my behaviour here or there for instance), then I am effectively changing the world. It is rarely a single very important person who changes the world. It is the people who produce the pressure, mood, need and energy for change to happen. So you or your friend, as long as you are active, is equally important to a top-notch decision-maker. In fact, you are the actual decision-maker.

It is possible to interact with the dynamic process of change in various ways and via various mechanisms through targeted intervention at a critical point in time, especially when considering that big changes tend to be an accumulation of small changes.

3.2. Elements of a Change Process

There must be a cause, something wrong to be righted. This can be a moral issue, an issue of justice, an issue originating from outdated scientific understanding etc. Change is something natural, part of the evolution of nature and human civilisation. Blocking natural change is therefore seen from a certain point as a wrong move that needs to be corrected.

Change is essentially driven by people's emotions, visions and aspirations. The intellect plays a role, but it is human feelings, such as compassion, which are the actual drivers of change. Any change initiative needs to take the emotional factors into account, because only when you touch upon emotional issues can you reach out to people's hearts and minds. It is about what kind of world we want to live in and about making people understand that it is in our hands to create this world.

In each movement, which creates change, decisive moments and incidents occur, when a balance tips. These tipping points relate many times to catastrophic events, as people have the tendency to primarily learn through small and large catastrophes (both world wars have served as tipping points for the creation of international institutions).

Fortunately, it is not only catastrophes that can serve as tipping points. Works of art (books like *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe), photography, sometimes even legal cases (as was the case with slavery or abortion for instance), technology, especially in the field of mass communications (bookprinting, radio, internet, development of PR and advertising) or social media, can have an electrifying effect. Artists are in fact highly underestimated actors of change.

Human sacrifice tends to be at the heart of what becomes a decisive moment, but so are personal statements of opinion and commitment. An individual, who overcomes fear and starts to act according to his/her belief disregarding all sorts of consequences, often turns the tide by being a role model, inviting others to follow suit.

Change processes are always also a power struggle, as those who benefit from the status quo usually have no interest in change and will resist it with the power they can afford and muster. Proactive change processes require actors who understand how power is used, detected or neutralized. This understanding flows into the conceptualization of change efforts and is incremental to change.

4. Moving Into Action

4.1. Finding the Entry Point Into the Matrix: Economics

If one wants to develop a pragmatic action plan to tackle the root causes and underlying drivers of the systemic crisis which manifests itself in so many ways, where should one start?

As the various layers of the matrix are inter-connected, any topic can serve as a point of entry. In fact, the point of entry is less important than understanding the linkages.

Values are fundamental and come up quickly in all debates since all basic questions such as “What kind of world do I want or want my children to live in?” boil down to questions on values. No matter their race, nationality, creed, gender, occupation or level of education, it seems that people are broadly in agreement in their perception of what a desirable future should look like. A world characterized by honesty, dignity, empathy, decency and gratitude. It is the simple joys of life that make life valuable; it is the shared relations with other people, be they family, friends, neighbours, that make a life rewarding.

Values are difficult to address though (but not when we address them as part of a holistic approach). “Belief systems” are intellectually better accessible and, as they are intrinsically linked with values, could provide an easier approach to engage “heart and mind”.

However, the most powerful and decisive driver behind what’s going wrong is the current economic paradigm. No matter which negative global development we want to stop or change, in the end we will have to replace our current system of theory and practice of economics, which have become counter-productive and detrimental to our future, with a new one. Current economics interacts with every person just about every day and it is a root cause behind so many of the crises humanity faces at a global level. Addressing economics seems to be the right point of entry. If there is anything that comes close to a magic button, it is economics.

Economics is not a natural science like Chemistry or Physics; it delivers what we want it to deliver. Whatever its achievements, they are what we want it to achieve and not the inevitable outcome of a natural law like gravity.

Economics and governance have over the last hundred years determined to a large degree the course of society and by and large they have served us well. But economics has also morphed into today’s material-driven, wasteful consumer society and a 1% versus 99% world and there is an increasing agreement amongst critical economists that it will not help if we tweak theory and practice of economics here or there. A fundamental rethink and restructuring are needed.

4.2. Finding Entry Points Into Economics

There is a broad, emotionalized and global debate taking place around economics. The debate has different levels: Underpinning the debates about technical issues such as GDP, taxes, distribution mechanisms, finance and banking is a more fundamental but largely under-represented moral and philosophical debate which is concerned with the role and purpose of economics in our current and future societies and the values that should guide them.

4.2.1. The moral, philosophical, and emotionally important debate can be summarized in key questions

- *Purpose*: What is the purpose of economy, what should economy deliver?
- *Growth*: What is it that should grow?
- *Progress*: What should we call progress?

- *Rights*: Do future generations have rights?
- *Value*: Which values should underlie our economic activities? Do we properly value the world's natural resources?
- *Earth*: Does what we do to the planet matter?

4.2.2. Key questions and topics relating to the technical debate

- *Scarce resources*: What is the most effective way to harness the world's scarce resources and humanity's vast undeveloped and untapped potential – to convert physical limits into a catalyst for human creativity and innovation and rapid social evolution?
- *Financial markets*: What is the role of financial markets and how far do their present functioning really serve that intended purpose?
- *Tax systems*: Why do we tax payroll making labor more expensive while incentivizing capital investment that eliminates jobs?
- *The lack of proper valuation of natural resources*: Why do we pass on the burden to future generations by pricing scarce natural resources far below their replacement level?
- *Monetary and trade policies*: What is Money? On what is it based? How and for whose benefit is it created? What is the impact of the current international monetary system on the real economy and employment?
- *Alternatives to the GDP, which better measure success of society*: How far are we really progressing economically when the real cost in terms of unemployment, inequality and destruction of the environment is taken into account? What would be the impact of measuring economic performance with indicators that more truly reflect the impact of economic activity on human welfare and well-being?
- *Regulation of banking and finance sector*: Is financial speculation a natural right if it endangers the stability of the economy and welfare of the majority?
- *Unemployment*: What is the true cost to society of unemployment and underemployment in economic and social terms? What is their cost in terms of human physical and mental health?
- Is there any policy mix by which we could obtain near full employment within the framework of a market economy?
- *Corporate law forcing corporations to give priority to shareholder interests*
- *Corruption*
- *Harmful subsidies and possible incentives*
- *Influence of wealth on politics and regulation*
- *Corporate lobbying*: What is the impact of corporate lobbying and money power on the functioning of democracy?

- *Rising inequality and its negative effects (also in rich countries)*
- *Extreme poverty*
- *A wide and diverse range of debates about the negative consequences of current economics: Waste, overfishing, climate change, rainforest destruction, depletion of natural resources, plastic, ocean, toxic chemicals.....*

4.2.3. The Outlines of a New Economy

The outlines of a new economy have been taking shape for a long time and there are a growing number of people, economists and even some enlightened politicians who support the notion that the overall purpose of an economy should be to provide income and meaningful occupation to a maximum number of people while at the same time safeguarding and strengthening the global natural resource base.

4.2.4. To achieve this we need a transition

- From unbridled financialization to financial markets that support job creation and equitable income growth.
- From technology for its own sake to technological applications that raise the quality of everyone's life.
- From quantitative growth for growth's sake to qualitative development of human security and well-being.
- From a dominance of material, egoistic and narcissistic values to values supportive of a healthy planet and a healthy human society.
- From a flow-through economy where resources basically move from the mine to the landfill to an economy which minimizes resource use by keeping it within a cycle.
- From the dominance of large, global economic systems to a better balance between local and global economic structures
- From a consumer to an earth citizen attitude
- From deregulation to an enlightened and stronger regulatory framework where public good costs are internalized

In principle there is considerable agreement on the need for fundamental change and a wide consensus on where to go. The unanswered question is, how will we get there?

4.3. Operational Recommendations

1. The collapse of the Soviet empire has shown that a system can be perceived as being made of solid steel, while in reality it is a hollowed-out earthen giant, ready to collapse. This might be true of much of the current (old) system, which is built on old beliefs and outdated paradigms. Joint efforts might be all that is needed to initiate the transition

towards a world built on respect and responsibility, where we see ourselves as earth citizens instead of consumers. Many of the topics where considerable effort has been undertaken to create change (seemingly without much success – we are debating the pitfalls of the GDP for more than 50 years) might in fact be low-hanging fruits.

There is no need to secure broad agreement before acting. In fact, we are witnessing many types of initiatives started by individuals, which immediately “snowball” and are picked up by large numbers of people, producing more impact than anticipated. The accumulated impact of these initiatives might already do the trick.

It is however important that individuals understand, as expressed above, that when they change their world they effectively change the world. They should not act out of a feeling of guilt, but out of a feeling of doing the right thing and be proud of having the character and the strength to do so. Individuals are the true decision-makers and they should act on their own pace.

Civil society organizations can aid this process by returning to the vision for the world as their first priority.

2. As stated above, we can view the situation and its causes as a matrix or better as a hologram. In practical terms: When addressing one element within the matrix we will always discover all the layers of the entire matrix. It is therefore essential to serve all layers even when aiming just for a particular one.

The distinct layers of the economics debate are:

- It is a values debate
- It is a debate on fundamental principles of economic, political and social theory
- It is a debate about belief systems
- It involves emotions
- It relates to people’s daily life
- It is a multi-layered technical debate, partly easy to follow, partly incredibly complex

The world currently addresses a technical aspect without addressing values and underlying beliefs and only a handful of people discuss values without getting emotional about their beliefs. We are addressing values without linking them to the technical level risks or considering them.

From an operational point of view it means that any kind of concrete target needs to be looked at from different angles. The conceptual approach requires a focus, but it should be functional at all levels described above.

3. Leverage investment by building on the interrelatedness, addressing the matrix with a systemic approach. Several projects should be linked in a mutually reinforcing manner and use different starting points. This can be done within an organisation or across organisations or as part of a funding strategy from a foundation.

4. To increase the chances of success it is advisable to free each project from limiting conditions and structures. Better invest in people than in organisations.
5. Link “theory” with “practice” by establishing mechanisms by which cutting edge thinkers interact with cutting edge practitioners such as campaigners in several day brainstorming settings.

4.4. Possible Areas of Intervention

4.4.1. Start thinking more fundamentally and radically in the truest sense of the words

There are many opportunities for intervention and the examples that follow are by no means a complete list. Some opportunities might sound insignificant, but a closer look reveals they aren't. Some might look entirely impossible, but trying them might prove this assumption wrong.

Fresh thinking is required and this implies freeing ourselves from our own limitations and from what others believe or tell us when they ask us to be realistic.

“The current concept of “Growth” is one of the intellectual pillars of today’s misguided economics.”

4.4.2. Address the societal objectives of economics, implicit assumptions and the values behind current economic theory and practice

The aim should be to get the economics debate out of its intellectual expert ivory tower and bring it down to the level of normal people. This can be done by raising basic moral, philosophical and essential questions, thereby initiating thought-processes and debates on what the true purpose of the economy should be.

4.4.3. Enter the values debate

By and large people from all walks of life, no matter the nation, race, creed, age, societal standing or income share a similar view about how they would like the world and human society to be: They will value honesty over dishonesty; kindness and compassion over cruelty and thoughtless behaviour; a decent life for themselves, their family and their children; decent health and education affordable for all; a safer and cleaner environment to live in; a level of prosperity that takes them out of poverty; a sense of belonging to a community; a strong sense of a purpose in life, and let's be frank, possessions and some vain desires.

4.4.4. Go to the theoretical roots of the root cause; one of them is the current concept of “growth”

An entire edifice of underlying, misleading beliefs has been built around “growth”: Growth in the sale of products and services has become the measure for progress of society and it is heralded as the only means to generate new jobs and as the only viable strategy to increase equality through re-distribution. In fact, current thinking on material growth has permeated our entire thinking. It is a bandwagon for the commoditisation of the world where all or everything is seen as either worthless or of financial value. The current concept of

“Growth” is one of the intellectual pillars of today’s misguided economics. It has been criticized since the 60s but little has changed in reality. A concerted effort might show that the time is ripe to seriously question the concept of “material growth” at the level of values and beliefs and at a technical level.

A fresh approach might mean focusing our energies on creating new ways of measuring society’s success, which can provide a better and more meaningful guidance. The immediate aim would not be to replace the GDP, but to promote alternatives, as there will most unlikely be a one-size-fits-all alternative. The old GDP might then still be around, but reduced to merely explaining a sector of economic activities. A lot of efforts have already been taken in this direction for many years and it might just require the right kind of team effort to make a difference.

“Universities are still based on old thinking and thereby delay the transition to a new economy.”

4.4.5. Challenge Corporate Law

A fundamental point of criticism on stock-listed large corporations is the primacy that is given to the interests of anonymous shareholders (short-term financial profit) and their helpers, largely the finance industry. The latter has become a destructive force by the accumulation of power through financial intermediaries such as hedge funds, investment vehicles and new financial instruments.

At the bottom of this is legislation, which obliges the management to primarily pursue the interests of stakeholders and the legislation that grants a company personhood.

People by and large have learnt to mistrust large companies. There would be no backing for a handful of wealthy shareholders or finance institutions having priority over the planet and the people as such. An initiative whereby corporations will be mandated through a change in law, that the interests of planet and people have a priority over the interests of single shareholder, which would probably receive overwhelming support. Sure, it will need explanations, but there are more difficult challenges.

4.4.6. Prepare for legal action against fossil fuel companies

The fossil fuel and energy companies, the mining sector and the food industry are probably the most problematic corporate sectors and it is especially the fossil fuel companies that block real progress for humanity, partly through strategies of manufacturing doubt⁴ initially developed by the tobacco industry.

This is not the only parallel. The fossil industry probably acts against its scientific insight, as the tobacco industry did and if this turns out to be correct then they should pay for the damage their actions have caused, or rather the damage that has been caused because they spent a lot of money on sowing doubt to prevent meaningful action from being taken. Preparing for a large lawsuit might yield interesting information and send a signal to the fossil fuel industry that their actions might not be without consequences for their shareholders.

4.4.7. Build consensus on the principles of an alternative framework for teaching new economics

Higher education is still organized around old thinking: It emphasizes a sectoral approach and teaches “past paradigm” knowledge. Nearly all universities teach the concepts of old economics and it is no wonder that the new thinking finds it difficult to gain ground when students are still being taught outdated concepts and thinking.

This is especially true for “economics”. Universities are still based on old thinking and thereby delay the transition to a new economy. Online courses and summer schools could bridge the gap and provide innovative teaching to economics students, thereby changing the university system from outside rather than from the inside, which might be a costly and expensive undertaking. In addition it would meet a lot of resistance from representatives of the old school and corporate university donors.

4.4.8. From consumer to earth citizen

The consumer mass culture did not come about naturally; it is the result of a deliberate and consistent effort.^{5,6}

It is not entirely clear if the many initiatives from individuals, groups of people, communities and cities to develop alternative means of living will soon merge into a much more powerful system opting out of the current hyper-consumerism but there is reason to believe that a targeted intervention could come at the right time.

This could be true for the Western countries, which have been part of the consumer culture for more than seven decades. It may not be true for all emerging countries such as China, India or Indonesia, where the aspiration for a Western lifestyle is met with the opportunities and the wealth to pursue material growth.

There is a lot of movement and people are changing their lifestyles, but considering human nature, will it be enough to bet on intellectual understanding and ethos?

We need holistic and long-term approaches and solutions. But our most important societal systems (capitalism and democracy) are built on short-term thinking, mechanisms and dynamics. Official reactions to our systemic challenges tend to be sectoral and not holistic (rebuild New Orleans instead of investing into clean energy).

Human beings tend to have a preference for decisions which grant them immediate gratification, so we might need to look at measures which can bring long-term benefits while providing short-term gratification. There seem to be plenty of hooks, as any measure, which increase the disposable income of citizens. Examples include:

- Increasing the longevity of products and the minimum product guarantee
- Eliminating waste in all its forms
- Reducing the personal financial vulnerability caused by being part of a global financial system by avoiding debt; by investing sustainably and not into murky derivatives; by switching to alternative banks; by keeping basic expenses low

- Gaining control of one's life by becoming part of local structures
- Strengthening and getting involved in all systems where goods and services are shared

All these initiatives result in a reduction of household spending and waste and could, combined with intellectual arguments and ethos, make a difference.

A powerful and largely neglected opportunity to participate in changing the economics of this world is through what kind of food we buy. By purchasing food everyone can make decisions about the environment and macro-economics on a daily basis. Food is where the rubber hits the road. Buying food means deciding over the use of chemicals; the destruction of rainforests, the support for local farmers; waste; suffering of animals; our own health and much more. Everybody can join this movement by starting to become more and more conscious, informed and selective about the food he/she buys.

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Notes

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