

Jakob von Uexküll  
Founder, World Future Council

ICT For A Global Sustainable Future  
Brussels, 22 January 2009

### **“Visions of a True Sustainable Future”**

We all have one common value: we want to hand over a healthy planet to our children. The World Future Council works to make this possible. We identify ‘best policies’ which help protect and heal our planet, and build a peaceful and equitable global order. We then work with parliamentarians worldwide to help implement these policies, via hearings, publications, mailings, films and a special website which enables them to adapt such legislation to their national requirements.

This is our ‘carrot’. Our ‘stick’ is our Future Justice Programme, identifying crimes against future generations, i.e. “future-foreclosing” activities. We recently held a hearing with judges and prosecutors at the various international courts in The Hague, to identify ways of building taboos and eventually criminalising such activities.

Our 50 global councillors do not work in isolation but dialogue with children and youths worldwide through our KidsCall Project.

Climate chaos is today the overriding global threat to our common future, so the council is prioritising policies which can slow and reverse it.

ICT has a key role to play in the urgent energy revolution, both in enhancing the productivity and efficiency of existing energy sources and in harnessing new, renewable ones. There is enough sunshine to provide the world with energy abundance and ICT can open the door to making this a reality, e.g. through smart national and international grids, which can cope and distribute renewable energy mixes over wide areas.

But this future is not guaranteed. The current financial crisis reminds us that mighty empires can collapse very quickly! If we allow climate chaos to reach the predicted tipping-points, then we may face a collapse of our civilisation, growing global conflicts and a rejection of rationality. As we know, after Rome fell, it took centuries for lost knowledge to re-appear. ICT needs to show that it can enhance solutions and minimize problems. I understand that one avatar in Second Life consumes as much energy as an inhabitant of Costa Rica...

Today even the recent past is a foreign country... Policies, which were unthinkable a few months ago, are today mainstream, e.g. the debt-free creation of money by governments and plans to nationalise whole banking sectors. Two days ago The Financial Times’ Commentary Page was topped by the headline: “Shoot the bankers and nationalise the banks”...

The collapse of trust in the old order opens opportunities to take large problem-realistic steps. Are we ready? I was an MEP in 1989 and remember how civil society in Eastern Europe soon lost out to special interests, because they were not prepared for power...

Visions need timetables! Coming up with new ideas is easy. Overcoming old ones is not. The first precondition for a sustainable future is the rehabilitation of the political space and of political action. In ancient Greece, the politically active citizen was known as a 'polites' while one who did not participate in political life was known as an 'idiotes'...

Politics today is too important to be left to career politicians. If we want change, we all – civil society activists, scientists, entrepreneurs etc – have to become politically active. I was an MEP for one electoral period and found my experiences there of huge value in my subsequent work! We do not need more lifelong politicians but we do need more of us prepared to move in (and out) of the political space, to ensure that we get the laws our common future needs, and not those the lobbyists of the protectors of privilege are fighting for.

Laws are very important. As Martin Luther King said, 'they do not move the heart, but they restrain the heartless'!

A sustainable future requires the right indicators of progress, measuring reality and not ideology. Last year, the President of the European Parliament, Mr Pöttering, opened a conference on Alternatives to GDP with the words: "We cannot say that we have seen our well-being increase because of economic growth." When you consider the sacrifices we – and our planet – have already made to achieve this economic growth, his statement has wide-ranging implications.

The author of Small is Beautiful, E.F. Schumacher, once said that the aim of a civilised society should be to achieve maximum wellbeing with a minimum of consumption.

GDP growth ignores the depletion of social wealth (trust and reciprocity) when market rule takes over. It also ignores natural capital destruction, not just by over-use but also by under-use (of our daily renewable energy potential).

Economic cycles come and go but an environmental collapse can last forever! You cannot negotiate with melting glaciers, nor does nature provide bailout packages. A sustainable future requires a shift from a cowboy economy to a co-operative spaceship economy, in which equity issues can no longer be postponed by trickle-down promises.

If globalisation is to survive, it will have to mean what the word implies: the distillation of the interests of all the globe's peoples, and not the imposition of the will of a privileged minority on everyone else.

We need corporate law reform to re-introduce personal responsibility and liability – before the shooting of bankers begins! We need to re-regionalise and re-localise economic power, so that negative externalities become more manageable and positive externalities can be enjoyed where they are created.

A sustainable future requires that we start taxing 'bads,' not 'goods'. The World Future Council is currently studying eco-taxes in order to identify what works best where. Pavan Sukhdev of Deutsche Bank, now seconded to UNEP, has proposed a value-depleted-tax, offsetting the environmental costs of production (as far as this is possible). A tax on speculative land value gains has been proposed for 200 years. It is fair and could provide many of the resources we need to build e.g. improved public transport systems.

A recent book by Harvard economist Prof. Stephen Marglin – a member of the World Future Council – is subtitled “How thinking like an economist destroys community”. The ideology of selfish capitalism not only threatens to destroy the health of our planet, but also undermines the human qualities needed to change course. This is no accident. As Margaret Thatcher said, “Economics is the method, but the object is to change the soul.”

So how do we implement our vision of a sustainable future? In times of crisis, big steps are often easier than small ones – as they can mobilise and inspire. And, to quote the US anti-slavery campaigner William Channing, “there are times in history when to dare is the highest wisdom”!

Today, we can see solutions everywhere, as long as we do not allow ‘experts’ to undermine the power of our vision. It now depends on each one of us whether or not (to quote the ‘Philosopher of Hope’ Ernst Bloch): “the great historical moment encounters too small a human race” – one not up to the challenge.

In 1940 fascism was winning the war. The British army was borrowing canons from museums in preparation for the expected Nazi invasion. Then President Roosevelt inspired his reluctant country to shift to a war economy, producing over 300,000 planes and 93,000 ships by 1945. A recent study of Roosevelt’s role concludes: “Ironically, while the leaders of industry clung to a more or less static view of the American economy, rooted in prevailing notions of limited annual growth, it was Roosevelt and his ‘impractical theorists’ who held a powerful vision of the country’s potential to produce more than anyone had ever dreamed possible”.

Today our common future depends on us all doing ‘more than anyone had ever dreamed possible’!

Thank you!