

Civil Society and Youth Leadership for Transformation

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by Thomas Reuter, Michael Marien and David Harries

1. Introduction: Civil Society and Youth Leadership for Transformational Change

New leadership strategies: From Discourse to Practice

This discussion paper looks at the current historical momentum and potential future development of civil society and youth leadership for a systemic transformation to a sustainable new civilization. It identifies emerging challenges, obstacles, and some of the innovative new leadership strategies that have been developed to overcome them. Civil society is central in the process of transformation in a dual sense: As the target of transformation – it is civil society at large together with governments and the private sector that must shift to sustainable practices in our daily lives –, and as an instigator of change – individuals, informal networks or organized groups of citizens specifically dedicated to promoting this transformation. This boundary between recipients and agents in society is fluid, as more and more people take action or join organized efforts to elicit a purposeful transformation.¹

Our collective failure to effectively address today’s unprecedented social and ecological challenges raises the prospect of a catastrophic collapse². This failure is not surprising, however. Transforming the entire way of life of whole populations, at a time when we are only just beginning to experience the dire consequences of our unsustainable practices directly, requires extraordinary awareness, foresight and courage, especially from those who would lead the transformation. Transformative leaders thus require a capacity to effectively communicate the need for change to the public, and sensitivity in dealing with the realities and aspirations especially of people in developing countries.

Civil society and youth (CS&Y) organisations³ have spearheaded efforts to raise consciousness of today’s systemic challenges among the general public, and they are now voicing their concern with ever-increasing urgency. An example is the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists’* recent decision to move the so-called Doomsday Clock to just 100 (metaphorical) seconds before midnight, the worst assessment of global security in the clock’s 75-year history (Kluger 2020). This begs the question: How much impact do such civil society actions have?⁴

The consciousness-raising efforts of CS&Y leaders have reached many global citizens, and certainly are noticed by those already convinced that the time for action is now. Success has been limited by the effect of a crisis-denying or crisis-ignoring counter-discourse, however, promulgated by vested interests and partisan forces with control of traditional mass media and substantial influence also over newer, digital and social media. This counter-discourse has found fertile soil in public sentiments of fear, distrust, unconscious change resistance, and justified resentments arising from growing inequality. A significant number of people in many countries thus continue to cling to an attitude of stubborn denial and prefer to put their faith in isolationist (anti-migration) and reactionary nationalism rather than in global cooperation and the UN’s SDGs (Reuter 2018). Thus civil society initiatives to promote a transformation to sustainability generally find themselves

operating in public spaces ever more challenged by a deluge of data, information, advertisement and entertainment.

Even those members of society who have been convinced of the need for transformation find it difficult in their own daily lives to extricate themselves from the systemic compulsions of prevailing cultural and economic orders.⁵ This reflects a general lag between the growing momentum of progressive ideas in public discourse and the conservatism of practice within an essentially still neoliberal economic setting. Many CS&Y organisations have begun to realise they need to focus on transformations of practice, and for some this entails calls for a “Green New Deal.” Such a new deal would provide a framework for unprecedented cooperation between sectors, and the approach would have to be peaceful, inclusive, demand-driven, rational, farsighted, compassionate and courageous in order to succeed. A business-as-usual approach with piecemeal adjustments to current policies and individual practices, based on a mere extension of conventional thinking, will not suffice this time.

The correct general strategy, in short, is to generate wide public support for the aspirational vision of a holistic transformation at a systemic level on the basis of a new discourse or ‘narrative’ of sustainability and sufficiency,⁶ while moving increasingly from discourse toward transformative practice on the basis of a Green New Deal or ‘eco-social contract’. The more difficult question is: What are the specific strategies or tactics that will empower civil society to do its part toward achieving the SDGs?

Contextualising the Role of Civil Society and Youth: Political obstacles

The remainder of this discussion paper seeks to identify some of the innovative new strategies and forms of leadership that are emerging in civil society, a complex sector within which the younger generation are a subgroup especially affected by today’s challenges, for three reasons: the extraordinary threat these challenges pose to this generation’s future, the often-outstanding contribution of youth to innovation and transformations throughout human history, and the fact that today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders.⁷ In order to evaluate the viability of any new strategies for transformation, however, it is important first to understand the obstacles civil society must overcome.

There has been much controversy about the meaning of ‘civil society’ reflecting protracted political struggles between those who would like to mobilise it and privileged groups who fear such mobilisation. Historically the term civil society can be traced to Aristotle’s concept of the ‘political community’ (*koinōnía politikḗ*), which builds on the assumption that all social life is essentially political because everyone has interests. This concept was translated into Latin as *societas civilis* by the Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni during the Renaissance. In the tradition of Hegel, de Tocqueville, Marx and Tönnies, however, most modern social theorists have argued that a well-functioning civil society cannot simply be taken for granted. Rather, it is reliant on the provision of adequate civic education and freedom of political organisation (which is often lacking in reality). Robert Putnam (et al. 1994) later added that civil society also needs to organise itself well if it is to generate social capital in a non-partisan way, free of vested interests. This is how civil society is still widely understood in contemporary social science, namely as *the sum of all such public organisations and movements within a society as are capable of generating social power independently of the state and vested private interests*.⁸

There have been numerous cases of instrumentalization or co-optation of civil society organisations by vested interests, including, occasionally those of CSOs.⁹ The need to ameliorate this risk has led to some interesting innovations. The anti-globalisation movement of the 1990s, for example, considered some of the more strictly organised and hierarchically governed CSOs at risk of becoming part of the machinery of neoliberal globalisation, distant

from the concerns of ordinary people and sometimes outright corrupt (Klein 1999). The informal leadership of this movement thus rejected organisational development toward a fully-fledged CSO, though arguably to the detriment of the movement's efficacy and impact (Graeber 2012). All CSOs and even unstructured social movements are bound to interact with the state and business sector in some ways, but must nevertheless be able to defy external control if they are to genuinely voice the interests and retain the trust of the general public. A degree of organisation may thus be imperative for CSOs, and yet it is not conducive to reproduce the hierarchical structures of states and corporations. This dilemma is difficult to resolve. A range of different models can be observed, from fiercely independent CSOs to deliberately unstructured social movements. In many cases the difference is merely developmental, given that movements often evolve into more tightly organised CSOs over time, while many CSOs in turn aim to promote mass movements around the causes they champion. A more inclusive term, "civil society actors" or CSAs, will thus be used hereafter to designate this broader range of social initiatives, ranging from movements to organisations.

Another important development was that, under the neoliberal discourse of 'restructuring' that swept through many countries, civil society came to be more sharply distinguished as a 'third sector' whose primary role it was to relieve the state and business sectors of their duty of care toward the public, rather than to criticise any state or market failures such as the destruction of the natural environment or inequality.¹⁰ By stressing the centrality of consumer choice in selecting "sustainable" products, liberal individualism implied that control lies with the consumer and that social movements are unnecessary. The third sector's existence was also used to legitimise the dismantling of government welfare systems.¹¹ This triggered a push-back from CSAs such as the anti-globalization movement, which criticised the reductionist designation of civil society organisations as 'NGOs'.¹² Such battles over the meaning and purpose of civil society initiatives continue, and the status quo varies from one country to the next.

Have today's CSAs brought about a systemic transformation? Certainly not yet. CSAs have done much to prepare the ground for change but, much like other sectors, partake in the general societal failure to mobilise for a transformation to socio-ecological sustainability *with the speed and on the scale* this multidimensional crisis demands. For now, improvements made are not adequate to keep up with the escalating magnitude of the challenges outlined in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Internal disagreements in the sector are part of the problem, and need to be addressed.¹³ More importantly, CSAs' capacity must be improved by employing innovative strategies designed specifically for transformative impact on public opinion and on practice. Some case studies of innovative CSA leadership are now discussed to bring us to the cutting edge of contemporary strategies, before looking to the future in the final section. Many innovations, it turns out, come from groups of young people unfettered by political entanglements, as was true also of other revolutionary transformations in history. Youth are prominent among many CSAs, and cannot be separated from them. Conversely, most youth movements also receive substantive support from adults.

2. Case Studies of Transformational Leadership in Civil Society

A few case studies may illustrate the potential as well as remaining limitations of recent and contemporary movements and organisations. The aim is to provide empirical case material from which we can deduce more general strategies for transformational leadership in this sector, and possibly beyond. Case studies were selected from across the spectrum of CSAs, ranging from unstructured movements to more highly structured CSOs.

Occupy Wallstreet

This movement began on September 17, 2011, with a large protest against economic inequality held in New York's Wall Street financial district. Famous for its slogan "We are the 99%", the movement successfully thematized inequality as a direct consequence of plutocracy. The mysterious hacker community *Anonymous* then pushed the OWS meme into the mainstream media with a video communique endorsing the action (White & Lasn 2011). The protests attracted sustained media attention over several months as they spread to other cities and countries,¹⁴ notwithstanding some 8000 arrests in the US alone.

As Michael Kazin (2012) noted, the movement espoused principles of direct action and direct democracy, rejected existing political institutions to the point of refusing to even direct any demands at them. *Occupy Wall Street* was ultra-egalitarian, deeply environmentalist, multicultural and scrupulously non-violent. Some innovative methods included the use of social media to mobilise 'flash mobs' that proved difficult for police to counteract. Commitment to equal distribution of power (direct democracy) was demonstrated by refusing the establishment of an internal hierarchy or representative structures. OWS instead adopted mutualism, consensus and self-organization as its core principles.

The protestors, predominantly young people, managed to mainstream the discovery that inequality had been escalating dramatically after the neoliberal reforms of the early 1980s. Neoliberalism had been implemented in the US and UK under President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, then spread around the world. The realisation that inequality had reached unprecedented extremes under neoliberal governments first came from the work of pioneering researchers, one of them Harvard University professor, Elizabeth Warren (2006), once a 2020 Democratic Party presidential candidate, and proponent (along with, if less ardently, Bernie Sanders) of a Green New Deal in the US. A later reinforcement came from Thomas Piketty's (2013) best-selling book, *Capital in the 21st Century*, which showed that enormous concentrations of wealth and power perpetuate and institutionalise inequality through the overwhelming influence of the 1% on national and international policies and actions, creating a vicious circle of impoverishment, while also enabling a reckless extractivist attitude toward nature.¹⁵ The Global Financial Crises of 2008 in turn had highlighted the dangerous systemic risks caused by neoliberal deregulation and unbridled greed.

OWS as such is now largely inactive, but clearly it did not exist in isolation and its ideas live on. The core achievement of OWS was the mainstreaming of information already available in academic and activist circles, while in turn encouraging countless other academics to contribute to a growing mountain of data on inequality and thus keeping the discussion alive, long after the protests had ended. Labour unions and NGOs such as Greenpeace expressed their support, as did a number of leading politicians and intellectuals, including David Graeber and Slavoj Žižek. In short, a kind of "widening circle" emerged as Tellus Institute founder Paul Raskin had envisaged in 2011: "a global citizens movement (GCM) [that] would work on all fronts, comprehending the various struggles for the environment and justice as different expressions of a common project" (Raskin 2011).

The shift in public discourse achieved by this broad alliance was such that even the World Economic Forum, a peak institution of the 1%, picked up on the theme of inequality. In 2013 WEF founder, Klaus Schwab, suggested in an interview that neoliberal capitalism was threatening to devour itself.¹⁶ At the 2017 Annual Meeting in Davos, the WEF's International Business Council (IBC, established in 2001) then issued a "Compact for Responsive and Responsible Leadership", signed by more than 140 CEOs. The compact (p.1) notes that "society is best served by corporations that have aligned their goals to the long-term goals of society," and identifies the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the framework for measuring such alignment.¹⁷

Despite such ongoing admonitions from the implicated elites, OWS protest actions have not spelled the end of the prevailing political-economic order, nor spelled out how the broad aim of eliminating perverse inequality could be achieved. And while neoliberal ideology has been discredited in public and academic discourse,¹⁸ the battle for a commensurate transformation of the political economy is still raging to this day. For example, many of OWS' ideas are being thematized in the 2020 US presidential election campaign.¹⁹

The Online Campaigners: MoveOn, Avaaz, Getup!, 350.Org and similar platforms

The impact of digital media on civil society's transformational potential and on its strategies of choice can hardly be overstated. This impact is so pervasive as to be almost universal, but it is most obvious perhaps among a group of CSAs that emerged around the turn of the millennium and specialised on raising public awareness and generating political pressure with online campaigning for a cluster of interrelated social and ecological causes. *MoveOn*, *Avaaz*, *350.Org* and *Getup* are among the most successful of these platforms.

MoveOn began as an e-mail group in 1998, created by software entrepreneurs Joan Blades and Wes Boyd for the purpose of a petition asking the US Congress to forego the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, which they saw as a distraction. The petition was very successful, gathering half a million signatures, and the couple went on to launch other campaigns, against the invasion of Iraq, for example. *MoveOn* also raised millions of dollars for Democratic candidates from Barack Obama to Bernie Sanders, and more recently gave support to Elizabeth Warren. While the platform thus has partisan, liberal progressive leanings, its methods were highly innovative and inspired other, more independent CSAs (Karpf 2009). *MoveOn* had combined net activism normally aimed at discursive change with practical political activism. Its website states that "MoveOn members are committed to an inclusive and progressive future. We envision a world marked by equality, sustainability, justice, and love. And we mobilize together to achieve it."²⁰

One of the second-generation platforms inspired by this success was AVAAZ, of which *MoveOn* was a co-founder together with *Res Publica* and the *Service Employees International Union*. While various foundations funded Avaaz staff and start-up costs, the platform has not accepted donations from corporations or partisan foundations since then. Some remarkable victories have been achieved by AVAAZ, detailed on its website, foremost in raising public awareness of the climate crisis. Christiana Figueres, former Head of UNFCCC, is cited, saying "Avaaz has been fundamental to mobilising broad support for climate action. Thank you Avaaz, you are music!"²¹ This is no exaggeration. AVAAZ has very strongly lobbied the financial sector (as have many others),²² for example, pushing toward divestment from fossil fuels. AVAAZ often works in tangent with other platforms such as *350.org* to mutually amplify related campaigns. The latter was founded in 2008 by a group of university friends in the US along with Bill McKibben, who had written one of the first books on global warming for the general public.

The former advocacy director of *MoveOn*, Ben Brandzel, also helped disperse the new model. In 2007 he advised a fledgling Australian Internet platform called *GetUp!*, which has since exceeded the successes of *MoveOn* by becoming a major force for promoting a progressive agenda in this country. *GetUp!* "gives everyday Australians the chance to make extraordinary impact – online, across the airwaves, and in the streets," according to its website.²³ The greater impact of the movement is based on further innovations, such as stationing thousands of volunteers at election booths to inform voters on policy differences between major parties on key issues such as climate change. *GetUp!* also organises protests and crowd-funded advertising campaigns to put pressure on government and corporate leaders at specific moments when vital decisions are being made.

The case of the campaign platforms shows once again how closely interwoven the recent activities of different CSAs have been in practice, though they may also to some extent compete for funding and attention. They are, one could say, an “interoperative coalition of courageous individuals, and forward-thinking organizations that explicitly express their commitment to the aspirations of civil societies globally.”²⁴ And once again, while participation is intergenerational, young people have been particularly prominent among the leadership of these platforms.²⁵

Fridays-for-Future

The recent civil society movement that has become most iconic of youth leadership, however, certainly with regard to climate action, is *Fridays-for-Future* or *FFF*.²⁶ Despite the meteoric rise to fame of its intrepid founder, the movement – for better or worse – is decentralised and horizontalist in its organisation, akin to OWS and also to the French *Yellow Vest* movement (*Gilet Jaunes*).²⁷ The movement was inspired by a 15-year-old teenager, Greta Thunberg, who started a three-weeks vigil in front of the Swedish parliament to draw attention to the climate emergency in August 2018. Instagram and Twitter postings of her actions soon went viral and inspired many others to follow her lead, inspiring school strikes held predominantly on Fridays. Reminiscent of the famous fairy tale of her fellow Scandinavian, Hans Christian Anderson, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, Greta’s action became an emblem of the powerful capacity of children to expose that which is obvious but still covered in denial. In this sense, FFFs success was the culmination of the work of numerous other CSAs, including those detailed above, which had made ecological and social injustices abundantly obvious by this time.

FFF is a dynamic global student movement comprising millions of passionate young activists around the world (the website lists contacts for 33 countries as of 30.1.2020) who insist their voices must be heard on the defining issue of their generation. *FFF* also knows its limitations, however, and directly appeals to older generations to do their part. The website’s ‘about’ section states: “*Fridays for Future* does not have the capacity or the competence to evaluate solutions. If you have a solution, we therefore urge you to send your contribution to those who do, so that it can be put to use.” Many teachers, parents and scientists support *FFF*. The movement also cooperates with many likeminded other CSAs, for example, by reposting videos produced by *Extinction Rebellion*, a movement founded in the UK in May 2018, and by the youth wing of the latter, founded in July 2019.²⁸ Unlike the *XR*, who employ a ‘disruption strategy’ reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi’s strategy of civil disobedience, such as provoking mass arrests with their spectacular and often highly artistic performances, *FFF* tends to evade direct confrontations with the state (and perhaps also vice versa) and adopts a ‘shaming strategy’.²⁹ In 2019, *FFF* was chosen for the UNEP’s ‘Champion of the Earth’ award as well as Amnesty International’s ‘Ambassador of Conscience’ award, while Greta gave speeches at the UN and *WEF*, was named *Time Magazine*’s person of the year, and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Her status as a young high school student did not prevent her opponents from attacking her, but some distasteful attempts to ridicule her on *Fox News* and elsewhere seem to have backfired.³⁰

Another, similarly ‘gentle’ approach is based on “incentive strategies,” such as those employed by the *Forest Stewardship Council*. The FSC created a new reputational incentive for companies to gain a label certifying them as eco-friendlier than their competitors, are also effective: Nearly 200 million hectares of forest have now been certified by this organisation.³¹

Greenpeace

From humble beginnings as a small group of activists in 1971, protesting against nuclear tests, *Greenpeace* has continuously grown by adapting to evolving challenges and opportunities. Emblematic of a well-organised and tightly structured CSA, it is today an international NGO with 26 regional offices (each with its own board of directors) operating in 55 countries, more than 2,000 staff, 15,000 volunteers and 2.8 million members.³² Independence is a core principle, and hence *Greenpeace* relies solely on individual contributions and does not endorse political candidates. It does not accept any form of violence as a method to achieve its goals. *Greenpeace* nevertheless believes in protesting through direct action, as this brings positive results and can inspire people and organizations to change their attitude towards nature. Current protest and strike actions focus on stopping deforestation for palm oil, sustainable food production, reducing the use of plastic, saving the Arctic from the effects of climate change and many other environmental causes at multiple scales. In doing so, the organisation often joins hands with partners operating at a national and local level.

Among many major successes for *Greenpeace*, an indicative recent case was the decision by TransCanada to abandon the Energy East tar sands oil pipeline and absorb a one-billion-dollar loss on the project in October 2017, after years of *Greenpeace* campaigning, demonstrations, often working in collaboration with First Nations, workers, local environmentalist groups as well as international supporters. An internal report says that: “It was because we wrote letters, took to the streets and the banks, pressured governments and built broad coalitions that we were able to delay this project, and ensure that once the project’s climate impacts were assessed even TransCanada recognized there’s no place for Energy East in a climate safe world.”³³ Strategies include volunteer training, tool kits for local groups of mainly young activist, and providing opportunity to such activists to launch their own online petition on a platform called GreenpeaceX. It is clear that *Greenpeace*, though nearly 50 years “old”, has been able to renew itself intergenerationally, has kept up with cutting edge campaign tools, and still sees itself as part of a wider, evolving grassroots movement.

The Indonesian Farmers Union

It is easy to recognize the impact of organisations and movements that attract the attention of international media, but when it comes to transformational action on the ground there are many unsung leaders, especially in the developing world. An indicative example, relevant to SDG 2 (Alleviating Hunger), is a new movement of farmers for social justice and environmental sustainability in Indonesia (Reuter 2019). At the national level this broad movement is represented by new non-partisan mass organisations. The largest is *Serikat Petani Indonesia (SPI)*, ‘Indonesian Farmers Union’, founded at a national gathering in Sumatra in 1998, marking the rebirth of independent farmer organisations after 32 years of political oppression under the military dictatorship led by General Suharto. *SPI* is a federation of the countless small, local, independent farmer cooperatives that proliferated after 1998, and is fiercely independent. *SPI* see public policy as hostile to farmers and serving the interests of a corporatized agroindustry. Conflicts with government agencies persist.

With 1.5 million members *SPI* has considerable political clout, enabling it, for example, to stage demonstrations or bargain directly with political parties. Through its branches on all main islands of the archipelago, *SPI* promotes sustainability, food sovereignty and ecological renewal – based on a blend of neo-traditional and modern organic farming methods –, as well as rebuilding local communities and economies. Human rights, land reform, fair trade and other agrarian justice issues are central preoccupations. Seed sovereignty is a priority too, and *SPI* thus have collected some 250 local rice varieties, which

are shared and propagated through an ingenious seed multiplication scheme. *SPI* encourages organic production but not to maximise prices, as this would compromise the human right of low-income consumers to healthy food. Farmers instead benefit from ‘going organic’ by reducing input costs, vulnerability to pests and increasing long-term yields. The aim is to supply food directly from farmers to consumers, using social media or, increasingly, dedicated online platforms.

Farmer education and field schools teach preparation and use of organic fertilisers and pesticides; sustainable land management; prevention, identification and eradication of pests; crop observation; harvesting and storage; as well as organisational skills and human resources management. This education is continuous and long-term, peer-based and modular, growing exponentially as trainees become trainers. *SPI* instructors have also been flown to Vietnam and elsewhere with the help of an international farmers movement, *La Via Campesina*, to train fellow farmers there, who are starting similar movements for socio-ecological sustainability. Given the strong cross-relevance of farming to other SDGs (including climate change, water, biodiversity conservation, poverty, education), national farmer CSAs in many countries and their global networks, such as *La Via Campesina*, are a major force for real, transformative change at the level of practice. Their work uses a combination of “entrepreneurial” and “community strategies” to achieve transformation, with tangible and growing success.

3. Trends and Strategies for Realising the Full Transformative Potential of Civil Society

Trends

Three basic trends stand out in civil society today.

First, the field for CSAs promoting ecological and social justice is a very crowded field indeed, with many thousands of organisations vying for influence at global, national, regional, and local levels. The overall number of CSAs has grown swiftly in recent decades. The ‘Security & Sustainability Guide’, a project of the World Academy of Art & Science, provides a partial list of organisations in this rapidly expanding field.³⁴

Second, while this rapid growth creates an element of competition, **the armada of today’s eco-social sustainability CSAs does increasingly act in interoperative ways.**³⁵ All are increasingly conscious of being part of a broader front for transformative change, despite a continuing element of fragmented thinking and competition for influence and funds. A recent report speaks of the **emerging interoperable conglomerates of activism as ‘Transformation Systems’, whereby “A T-system comprises all those initiatives nudging a status quo system [...] in a similar transformational direction.** These efforts may operate alongside a status quo system [...] But T-systems are focused on change and innovation, compared with the status quo’s emphasis on production and administration. They require their own distinctive identity, skills, and organizing space to operate.”³⁶ Most of these conglomerates are still of a partial and transitory nature, but there is a **growing incentive to achieve greater interoperability as CSAs** become more desperate to achieve timely transformative action.

Third, we noted that most of today’s interlocking T-Systems are powered by Civil Society and Youth Actors, who together oppose the alternative ideology of nationalism and climate change denialism peddled by the populist ‘Alt-Right’ movement (Hawley 2019) and its powerful captive state and private sector backers, in the name of conservative values and ‘freedom’.³⁷ In some countries society has been drawn into a state of polarisation by these forces, while in others, particularly autocratic ones, a reactionary agenda has gained ascendancy.³⁸ Much of this variability depends on how much support transformative CSAs receive from progressive elites and their leaders, as well as still independent and genuinely informative media.³⁹ From the perspective of science, the facts would seem to speak for

themselves: **systemic transformation has become a precondition for human survival.** This sobering truth perhaps cannot be denied for much longer but for now the facts are still not being heard loudly and clearly enough to convince everyone, most likely due to inadequate outreach toward the general public (Marien 2019). CSAs and forward-looking members of political, corporate and financial elites are beginning to form a coalition of common understanding around this truth, however, with some companies now changing their focus from shareholders to stakeholders, espousing ESG values (environment/social/government) or the “triple bottom line” (people/planet/profit). This is promising, as far as it goes.

Associated obstacles and solutions

In light of these trends, two core obstacles can be identified:

1. Rising fear within the broader society has the potential for violence. This fear must be met with a clear narrative and transparent plan of action that is scientifically sound, just and achievable. Dealing with a public that is feeling tired of mere narratives of change, CSAs would also be well advised to focus more on how to make tangible progress toward a sustainable future, on many fronts, and on thus re-building people’s confidence. Some are doing just that, but possibly too late. As of late March 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic has increased the level of fear, and limiting the crisis has become ‘job one’ for every government and leader on earth, and rightly so. Given today’s situation and informed predictions of what is to come, the UN’s 2030 Agenda has been thrown into disarray by the failure to prepare for such a global pandemic, despite repeated warnings from virologists. At the same time, a successful mobilisation to address this health crisis could help build confidence in our collective ability to address also the much bigger climate and ecological crisis.

2. CSAs must continue their struggle against political change resistance from powerful reactionary actors and their determined, if often wilfully blind, followers. Perhaps such resistance can also be reduced at its core if leaders do not obstruct or prevent a reverse ‘restructuring’ of the neoliberal, extractivist and polluting economy toward socio-ecological sustainability.⁴⁰

The second issue begs the question: What will become of the naked emperor with his imaginary clothes? Hans Christian Anderson, wisely perhaps, left this moot question open:

"But he hasn't got anything on!" the whole town cried out at last. The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.⁴¹

The transformation that is now urgently needed will lead to the stranding of assets worth many trillions of dollars in the fossil fuel industry alone. There will be jobs that are no longer needed, and workers to be retrained or compensated, new industries to be built and jobs created, landscapes to be restored through regenerative agriculture and rewilding, all of which ultimately flows from a commitment to life-affirming values. If the emperor is to acquiesce to the truth and play a new game, however, it is likely to require a mix of negotiation and maximum pressure. CSAs may keep building the pressure, as they have been doing, until the emperor must relent, but it may also be that CSAs have already reached the limits of their social power, short of adopting revolutionary means and risking a coercive backlash from privileged actors. So far, CSAs like Greenpeace or FFF simply do not yet have the numbers on the street to force the issue, even if they wanted to.⁴² Perhaps the emperor(s) will start to look for a non-confrontational way out rather than risk reaching a political

tipping point. For now, the procession continues, but as time runs short, the scope for avoiding confrontation narrows. For that reason, civil society must use this present time well to maximise its peaceful pressure tactics, some of which are listed below.

Specific Strategies or Tactics to enhance CSA capabilities

1. **Develop innovative forms of decision making for civil society organisations that will empower collective action without producing new hierarchies.** For example, WAAS fellow Mariana Todorova has developed a blockchain-based digital tool (DG Agora) to enable precise and cost-effective decision-making consistent with the direct or **'liquid' democracy principles** espoused by OWS and others. It serves to empower public companies, NGOs, political parties, governmental bodies or social movements with a novel cost-effective communication system that facilitates engagement with their shareholders, members, stakeholders or voters in an inclusive secure way in a spirit of liquid democracy.⁴³
2. **Consciously utilise interoperability through partnerships or alliances between CSAs pursuing similar causes,** while also leveraging their different capabilities. For example, the *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)* is a global civil society coalition working to promote adherence to and full implementation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.⁴⁴ *ICAN* is more impactful than the plethora of its constituent organisations working in isolation but also benefits from their diverse capabilities. Such cooperation will need to be intensified further in order to mobilise civil society protesters in a synchronised manner and in sufficient number to force political change.⁴⁵ Failure to mobilise, based on the false idea that “great progress is already being made,” on the other hand, is likely to lead to the self-marginalisation and eventual collapse of CSOs (Marien 1983).
3. Take steps to **bridge gaps between global goals and local community-based action** through more partnerships between global and local CSAs and gaps between CSAs in the Global North and South (as Greenpeace is doing), as well as initiating more South-South partnerships (such as *La Via Campesina*).
4. CSAs with relevant experience and capability need to help equip local CSAs with modular training, tool kits and access to technology such as campaign or blockchain platforms, and condensed information packages such as MOOCS.⁴⁶
5. Reorient online campaign networks from an exclusive discourse transformation focus toward the **transformation of practice**, for example, through voter education, product or company boycotts, divestment campaigns and behaviour-change pledges (for example, GetUp! campaigns, but also the UN's Global Compact for companies and cities).⁴⁷
6. Combine and cross-amplify the effect of CSA tactics such as the 'shaming, disruption and incentive strategies' discussed above, and consider peaceful civil disobedience tactics in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi.
7. Use global CSAs media reach to publicise successful local transformative action in communities (e.g. farmers and small entrepreneurs) so as to provide knowledge transfer and inspire other communities worldwide to follow their example.
8. Create partnerships with engaged academic actors such as WAAS, to ensure claims made by CSAs are in line with the latest research findings. This is vital to avoid factual mistakes that can erode public trust.
9. Seek dialogue and create platforms for encounters aimed at building partnerships with progressive media, corporate, finance and state actors. Many partnerships are being formed. The World Academy's Security & Sustainability Guide (SSG) makes reference to some notable ones.⁴⁸ Others include the Katharsis Foundation currently

being established by a group of WAAS and CoR fellows, and the Future of Finance initiative,⁴⁹ also supported by WAAS.

10. Create a fund in which money and pledges are received, managed and allocated in support of worldwide SDG efforts by CSAs. Such a fund would require a bank, location and processes that do not allow interference by organisations or individuals lacking genuine commitment to the SDG campaign.⁵⁰ As well, it will be important to identify and acknowledge the efforts of existing, compatible funds, in order to avoid wasteful duplication and competition. The SSG lists some 70 grant-giving foundations.
11. **Strengthen the economic narrative around the need for transformation** (e.g. by calculating the mounting cost of climate change, biodiversity loss and inequality and also the potential economic benefits of timely transformation). “Green capitalism” and “green growth” should be promoted as serious alternatives to the simplistic capitalism/socialism dualism, while similar fears about one-world government should be assuaged by stressing the autonomy of states in how exactly they chose to pursue the SDGs. A green economics alliance or coalition is needed to unite existing efforts by a variety of organisations, including the WAAS New Economics working group.
12. Unite efforts to convince the public that transformation is feasible and highly desirable, and prominently involve CSAs in this process.⁵¹ Awards for the best initiatives could be part of this (such as the World Future Council’s “Future Policy Award”).⁵²

4. Concluding remarks and recommendations

No matter what strategies we chose to employ, it remains true that society may struggle or fail to transform itself voluntarily, in the absence of palpable adaptive pressures. **The global corona virus pandemic crisis is an opportunity for humanity because it certainly creates such pressure.** For many countries in the developed world, which are also the main source of global challenges such as global warming, this pandemic is by far the greatest physical challenge since World War II. It is an occasion to test our ability to adapt and, if we succeed, perhaps we will find the courage also to address the much bigger ecological crisis.

Adapting to the risk of spreading infection, we are now forced to stay home, to slow down, to down-shift and break our addiction to speed, hyper-mobility and often mindless consumption. To our own surprise, we find that we can adapt rather quickly, if pressed hard. Perhaps we will not want to return to business-as-usual, but will find some of the changes are in fact delivering co-benefits, such as reduced carbon emissions.

The shift we are now forced to make is ultimately a moral shift. What is really important, we must ask? What can we do without and, perhaps even, good riddance? Humanity might take this opportunity collectively to reflect on the way forward. Quite apart from the current pandemic, climate change is also starting to bite us harder and harder, as was illustrated – to name but one example – by Australia’s massive wildfires recently. Leaders in all sectors must grasp the opportunity to summarise the lessons and to smooth the path forward by proposing practical and fair solutions.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Transformation can be defined as “profound and enduring nonlinear systemic change, typically involving social, cultural, technological, political, economic, and/or environmental processes” (Linnér & Wibeck 2019).
- ² On 13 March 2020, for example, the CEO of the World Future Society called for hundreds of thousands of volunteers to help address “the risk of major, even total societal system collapse.”
- ³ Although a focus in this essay is on youth organizations, women’s organizations have played at least as important a role. The World Academy’s Security & Sustainability Guide (SSG) already lists 31 that are noteworthy. See: <http://worldacademy.org/program-page/security-sustainability-guide>
- ⁴ Civil society leadership impact is difficult to quantify without a designated and effective mechanism for impact assessment. One exemplary effort in this direction is Yale University’s *Program on Climate Change Communication*; see <https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/>
- ⁵ Cultural and economic orders are always local and hence diverse, although today they also share a common experience of globalisation. Diversity needs to be considered in discussions of systemic changes. Nevertheless, a diversity of local actions may well serve a common global goal.
- ⁶ Donella Meadows, the early environmentalist and lead author of the Club of Rome’s famous report, *Limits to Growth*, later listed a number of key leverage points or “places to intervene in a system” (Meadows 1999). She argued that the most important leverage point is transcending paradigms or mindsets – the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves, our place in the world and our purpose as human beings.
- ⁷ Many youth organisations are in fact organised to some extent by adult-led organisation, such as the UN’s ‘Young Leaders for the SDGs IUCN’s ‘Intergenerational Partnership for Sustainability’, International Solar Energy Society’s ‘Young ISIS’ (student members), Japan for Sustainability, and Earth Guardians. These adult-initiated youth groups may be as influential or more so than many purely youth-led groups.
- ⁸ The same need for a high degree of independence also applies to the ‘fourth estate’, the media. While leaders often have their own reliable information sources, a press that is independent of government as well as corporate influence plays a decisive role in disseminating the information necessary to mobilize an informed response by civil society at larger. The reputation of the free press seems to be more and more in danger in as the number of journalists decline. Sadly, while a new, parallel network of online news now busily points out the flaws of established press channels, it often delivers ideologically tainted and socially divisive coverage rather than a more balanced alternative picture. Nevertheless, alternative sources of news can also be excellent.
- ⁹ This cannot be said of all organisations that self-identify and are registered as NGOs. Global NGOs have been predominately located in western countries, more specifically clustered in ten big cities: Stockholm, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, Boston, Washington and Oakland. A few have been used to advance western interests abroad in a less than fully transparent manner or even of carrying out espionage or interventions in domestic affairs, leading to a tightening of controls of foreign NGOs in many developing countries, including Russia, China, India, and Turkey in recent years. It also led to the creation of a UN high level panel on civil society in the 1990s. In some cases governments use such accusations to justify the persecution of NGOs that uncover inconvenient truths about their own malpractices.
- ¹⁰ The extent of this failure could be debated in light of the fact that many people also have been lifted out of extreme poverty. The largest contribution, however, has come from China, which is not a neoliberal market economy.
- ¹¹ These observations do not apply to countries where a totalitarian state actively suppresses civil society actors and thus must assume the full responsibility for social welfare, if there is to be any.
- ¹² It is important, in this context, to understand that an ‘NGO’ such as Greenpeace is ultimately a ‘government allowed non-government organization’, insofar as formal NGOs need to be registered and act in conformity with legal provisions in their country of registration.
- ¹³ There are some basic and often unacknowledged conflicts among green leaders: notably, between so-called realist (“realos”) and fundamentalist (“fundis”) positions of, for example, those seeking green economic

growth vs. those who argue for degrowth, or between those viewing nuclear power as part of the clean energy solution vs. those to whom any form of nuclear power is anathema.

¹⁴ In Germany, for example, it sparked the formation of the 'Blockupy' alliance, a network of organizations and grassroots activism that emerged in 2012 in response to the protracted euro crisis and the austerity politics imposed by the so-called troika of creditor agencies.

¹⁵ On inequality and how to address it, see also Piketty (2020), Saez & Zucman (2019) and Stiglitz (2019).

¹⁶ <https://www.cnbc.com/id/100394650>

¹⁷ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/Media/AM17/The_Compact_for_Responsive_and_Responsible_Leadership_09.01.2017.pdf

¹⁸ Following Nobel Prize-winning columnist, Paul Krugman, neoliberal economics may be a "zombie idea" that just keeps coming back, that is, a belief or doctrine that has repeatedly been proved false, but refuses to die and just keeps shambling along, "eating people's brains" (NY Times Op-Ed, 4 Feb 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/opinion/bloomberg-buttigieg-economy.html>). See also Krugman (2020).

¹⁹ The same can be said of the previous election, where anti-elite sentiment was successfully exploited by Donald Trump. This act of co-optation of public sentiment was a major setback for the social cause of equality, given that his subsequent policy decisions were quite the opposite of "draining the swamp" (of Washington), which he had promised to do.

²⁰ <https://front.moveon.org/> Note that the resources of platforms such as MoveOn come largely from many small donations from subscribers.

²¹ www.avaaz.org/page/en/

²² Marien & Sales (2017) describe some 150 organisations involved in similar lobbying, including Business-Led Groups (e.g. World Business Council for Sustainable Development), Ethics-Driven Groups, Broadened Accounting (e.g. the Sustainable Accounting Standards Board), Certifying Organizations (such as the Forest Stewardship Council, p.6), Green Investing, Green Consulting and Green Business Publishers (such as GreenBiz).

²³ <https://www.getup.org.au/>

²⁴ David Harries, Pugwash Canada, personal communication, 18 March 2020.

²⁵ There is a risk of another generation gap arising, similar to what happened after WW2, if youth disappointment with the older generation increases much further. Intergenerational civil society movements are an important preventative.

²⁶ www.fridaysforfuture.org/

²⁷ The Yellow Vest Movement apparently had "no leadership structure, no single, accepted programme of demands" (Lichfield 2019:1), though some individuals now have taken steps to create lists for the next election. Briefly on the rise of the Gilet Jaunes: In May 2018, a young entrepreneur of French West Indian origin, Priscillia Ludosky, 31, placed a petition online complaining about the high cost of petrol and diesel in France (ironically, a measure to reduce CO₂ emissions). In October she was contacted by Eric Drouet, a 33-year-old lorry driver who helped to promote her original petition. The first day of protests, on 17 November 2018, mobilised a staggering 283,000 people across France.

²⁸ <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/about-us/>

²⁹ XR has raised three general demands: 1) Government must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change; 2) Government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025; and 3) Government must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice. The third point is most relevant to the present discussion as it asks governments to provide civil society with more space to lead a direct democracy-style decision-making process regarding the environment. Their vision is for a new culture that is fit to ensure the survival of the next seven generations.

³⁰ See www.thedailybeast.com/fox-news-guest-calls-greta-thunberg-mentally-ill-swedish-child-as-right-wing-unleashes-on-climate-activist. Similar abusive comments were made about Thunberg in Canada, Australia and elsewhere by denialist politicians and media personalities.

³¹ <https://fsc.org/en/page/about-us>

³² www.greenpeace.org/international/

³³ See www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/story/510/victory-people-power-just-stopped-another-pipeline-bye-bye-energy-east/ More recently, the company TECK cancelled their application for the Frontier Oil Sands Mine in Northern Alberta; see <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/tasker-teck-frontier-future-oilsands-1.5475658>

³⁴ See <https://securesustain.org/>. The WAAS Security & Sustainability Guide is a continuous project. It identifies literally thousands of organizations vying for attention, more than 2,000 so far, with new organizations, alliances, initiatives, networks, and institutes being formed daily, and many established organizations adding new programs. The rate of growth is steady and probably increasing, and more than half of these organizations have been formed since 2003. Note that it can be difficult to delineate what constitutes a CSO. For example, academic organisations and institutes or unstructured social movements may not be counted as CSOs but do fit the definition of CSAs in most cases.

³⁵ On social sustainability and also social tipping interventions, see Otto et al. 2020. The authors discuss the potential of social tipping interventions (STIs) that would “activate contagious processes of rapidly spreading technologies, behaviours, social norms, and structural reorganization.” Examples include removing fossil fuel subsidies and strengthening climate education.

³⁶ <http://www.futureearth.org/publications/our-future-on-earth> (page 84).

³⁷ See also www.counterpunch.org/2019/05/03/the-billionaires-behind-the-far-right/

³⁸ There appear to be few genuinely progressive regimes; perhaps Finland and New Zealand. Of note is that no regime is fully supportive of a Green New Deal or fully implementing the SDGs.

³⁹ The general arguments against climate action and the Green New Deal, at least in the US, are in three categories: 1) Economic: a transformation would be too costly; 2) Governance: pro-“freedom” and fearing any form of greater regulation would lead to “socialism” and big government, as well “domination” by the UN; and 3) Risk: the dismissal position that accepts global warming but cautions against “prophets of doom” who warn of climate catastrophe.

⁴⁰ See the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative’s EITI Standard: <https://eiti.org/document/eiti-standard-2019>

⁴¹ The text of the fairy tale in English translation can be found at https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html

⁴² Unlike the recent protests in Hong Kong, for example, the push for a transformation to sustainability does not necessarily equate to a push to topple the government per se, and thus may meet with less resistance.

⁴³ Mariana Todorowa, 2020, *DG-Agora 2.0*, unpublished manuscript.

⁴⁴ <https://www.icanw.org/>

⁴⁵ Many forces act to prevent the implementation of innovative forms of social organization within and cooperation between institutions. Conservative leadership hierarchies may be more focused on self-preservation than on their organisation’s proclaimed aims. The logic of capital and money-dependence does not stop where civil society starts.

⁴⁶ An example of the latter is the series of excellent MOOCs offered for free by the UN-sponsored *Sustainable Development Solutions Network*, run by Jeffrey Sachs.

⁴⁷ See <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/what-is-gc> and <https://citiesprogramme.org/>

⁴⁸ <http://worldacademy.org/program-page/security-sustainability-guide>

⁴⁹ http://www.worldacademy.org/files/washington_dc_sep_2019/SBrunnhuber_A_WAAS_Initiative.pdf

⁵⁰ The index of the World Academy’s SSG lists some 70 grant-giving foundations that support SDG efforts by CSAs. Meanwhile, Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man at present, has recently pledged \$10 billion to fight climate change. The degree to which CSAs must meet pre-set conditions to receive grants varies.

⁵¹ Prominent recent efforts to date in this direction include the report ‘Transformations to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals’ by ‘The World in 2050 Initiative’, IIASA, July 2018 (<https://iiasa.ac.at/web/home/research/twi/Report2018.html>), as well as the Stockholm Resilience Centre report to the Club of Rome, ‘Transformation is Feasible: How to Achieve the SDGs Within Planetary Boundaries,’ Oct 2018 (<https://www.stockholmresilience.org/publications/artiklar/2018-10-17-transformation-is-feasible---how-to-achieve-the-sustainable--development-goals-within-planetary-boundaries.html>).

⁵² <https://www.worldfuturecouncil.org/press-release-2018-fpa2018-winners/>) and the Future Earth report ‘Our Future on Earth’ already mentioned in FN 36.