Needed: The Solutions Generation

Robert Costanza
Portland State University

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The global uprisings that began with the Arab Spring and more recently the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations are indications of growing unhappiness with the state of the world, especially among the younger generation. Americans are finally directing their frustration at the right people—the financial and corporate elites who currently govern the United States and have caused the ongoing crisis. Anger and protests can be effective at bringing the current system into question. But they do little, by themselves, to lead the way to a better future. For that we need a compelling shared vision and a focus on solutions.

In 1776, a group of rebels had such a vision: a government of, by, and for the people. Notwithstanding their rather narrow definition of “the people,” this shared vision had profound implications and helped solve some fundamental problems of human well-being—by spreading participation in governance to the population and rewarding intelligence, hard work, and innovation.

In 1945, the fundamental Western problems confronting our leaders concerned rebuilding the nations devastated by the Great Depression and World War II. The vision that emerged from the baby boom generation involved a focus on built capital, economic production and consumption, full employment, and an expanded middle class. The “great acceleration” that began at that time, largely driven by the consumption of oil and other fossil fuels, had profound implications and helped solve...
some of the significant challenges of the time. But single-minded pursuit of this vision also created a new set of problems.

In 2011, our fundamental problems include the vast gap in incomes within and between nations, the ecological limits we are exceeding or approaching (climate change, biodiversity loss, etc.), the peaking of global oil production, the deterioration of natural and social capital, and the consequent threats to human well-being and sustainability that all of these imply. What we need now is a new vision and a generational commitment to finding real solutions. The “Solutions Generation” needs to think outside the box to create a vision of a better, more sustainable world for themselves and their children. They will have to design new technologies, new institutions, and new societal norms in order to get there;1 including new political and economic systems that can create shared prosperity without increasing demands on a finite environment.

This cannot be a top-down corporate or government vision. It must be built and it must be shared. If anything, it will be “bottom-down” decision making—an approach that reflects the needs of the vast majority of the people, not just the economic elites.

Probably the most important element of this new vision will be a refocus on the goal of sustainable human well-being instead of maximizing conventional economic production and consumption (GDP). In 1945, GDP was the limiting factor to improving well-being. Now we know that continued global growth in production and consumption in the developed countries is not sustainable. It is also not desirable in that it provides only marginal improvements to societal well-being in the rich countries. As many have noted, including Tim Jackson2 and the Sarkozy Commission headed by Joseph Stiglitz,3 GDP is fatally flawed as a measure of progress, and we desperately need new measures of well-being. We know from both the latest psychological research and from ancient wisdom that well-being and happiness depend on the appropriate balance of assets and opportunities. These include those supplied by marketed goods and services but also those supplied by social and natural capital. It is clear, for example, from the work of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett,4 that countries with big income gaps have higher rates of a range of social problems, from crime to imprisonment to shorter lifespans. The existence of greater income gaps makes building social capital harder, and that ultimately leads to lower societal well-being. Likewise, it is clear that natural capital provides a range of ecosystem services that are hugely important but largely unrecognized contributors to sustainable human well-being.5,6 These services include everything from maintaining a stable climate to producing soil and water to providing spectacular and inspiring views.

We will have to create a new vision of societal goals and the technical and institutional solutions necessary to achieve them. This vision will involve a better understanding of what actually contributes to human well-being and sustainability. It is a huge challenge that will require a generation to accomplish—the Solutions Generation.

Many groups and communities around the world are already involved in building this vision and developing real solutions. There are far too many to list, but here are a few:

• Transition town movement, www.transitionnetwork.org
• Great Transition Initiative, www.gtinitiative.org
• Wiser Earth, www.wiserearth.org
• Center for a New American Dream, www.newdream.org
• Portland, Oregon, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, www.portlandonline.com/bps/index.cfm
• Sustainable Cities International, sustainablecities.net

It might be worth pointing out, in closing, that nature operates with a subtle dynamic between competition and cooperation. In “empty world” times of resource abundance, competition is favored. The great acceleration powered by abundant fossil fuels favored individualism, competition, and greed-based capitalism. The coming “full world” will favor cooperation and networking. We can now, as a global society, communicate, network, and cooperate as never before in the history of the planet. It will be the great work of the Solutions Generation—Gen S—to use this new capacity to envision and build a better, more sustainable, just, and prosperous society within the planetary boundaries of earth.7

References