

A living systems approach to achieving global equity for a healthy planet

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The Club of Rome's unique proposition to this project is based on its deep understanding of how living systems change. We are experiencing an existential crisis precipitated by multiple system failures on a global scale. This existential crisis demands appropriate creative responses from all of us.

As the world-renowned anthropologist and systems thinker Gregory Bateson so poignantly said decades ago, the challenge we face is because of the difference between how human beings think and how nature works. This difference also concerned co-founder of The Club of Rome Aurelio Peccei, who was struck by humanity's inaction in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence of the threats posed by limitless economic growth on a planet with limited resources. He characterised this "human gap" in *No Limits to Learning*: "... [the human gap] is the distance between growing complexity and our capacity to cope with it.... It is a dichotomy between growing complexity of our own making and a lagging development of our own capacities" (Botkin, 1979).

The challenge before us now is to explore how to emerge from the multiple existential planetary emergencies. How might we promote mindset shifts towards greater awareness that the essence of being human is to be interconnected and interdependent and that everything is connected to everything else in the web of life? Acknowledgement that we are part of the web of life and not separate from nature is critical.

We have caused system failures by placing ourselves above and apart from nature. A powerful global minority's lifestyles of overconsumption imperils the future of all life. We require a complete transformation of our ways of thinking. We need to learn from nature's intelligence from billions of years of evolution so that we can reimagine and reset our broken systems and institutions.

How does this fit with the turnarounds?

Living systems change requires holistic rather fragmented approaches. Linear processes are not up to the monumental task we face. We need to accept that everything is interconnected and interdependent. Each of the five turnarounds – outlined in the book *Earth for All: A plan for global wellbeing on a healthy planet* to be published in 2022 – is interconnected and interdependent, and we cannot address them individually or sequentially.

A living-systems approach to change would ensure that each of the interventions reinforces the overall goal. David Korten's paper "[Ecological Civilization: From Emergency to Emergence](#)", published in 2021 on The Club of Rome website, points the way to identifying the core values. David Korten's core values of living systems change:

- 1. Acknowledge the limits of Earth's regenerative capacities;**
- 2. Commit ourselves to equitable sharing of what remains; and**
- 3. Restore Earth to full health while reconnecting with one another to secure a good life for all people for generations to come.**

The Club of Rome's 2021 Annual Conference adopted the theme Global Equity for a Healthy Planet. This theme is an appropriate guide to the systems change we are seeking. The enthusiasm with which members of The Club of Rome and guests tackled the conference subthemes is an encouraging sign that there is growing convergence with respect to the urgency of tackling our planetary emergencies.

The turnarounds do not demonstrate sufficient understanding of the interconnectedness of not only “wicked problems” but the interconnectedness of these problems with their historical roots. Moreover, ongoing patterns of wealth creation and consumption in rich countries create vicious cycles, aggravating the problems at hand. The pursuit of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embedded in the Earth4All approach is an unfortunate indicator of reliance on

the orthodoxy of so-called global development models that have failed to tackle the fundamental structural problems driving global inequity and planetary emergencies.

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Dominant Western nations need to acknowledge that the historical process of colonial conquest and the extractive economic models established then and continuing today are responsible for poverty and inequities throughout our world. Climate change crises driven by insatiable fossil fuel extraction and the use and destruction of indigenous natural resources across the globe have destroyed the foundations of indigenous cultures and wisdom that sustained food security, equitable wellbeing and a healthy planet.

As C. T. Kurien, an Indian economist, wrote many years ago: “Poverty is the carcass left over from wealth acquisition” (Wilson & Ramphela, 1989). India's iconic liberation hero and wise man

Mahatma Gandhi also reminded us that there are enough resources to meet the basic needs for all on Earth, but not enough to satisfy the greed of the few at the expense of the many. None of these turnarounds can be tackled in isolation from one another nor in isolation from the urgent transformation required of the current system of wealth creation and its underlying overconsumption patterns.

For example, fossil fuel energy acquisition and use in Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces of South Africa destroyed rich agricultural lands, impoverished indigenous communities and left scars on landscapes that were once food baskets even beyond the borders. To add insult to injury, extractive agriculture by colonial settlers and their heirs impoverished and continues to impoverish the majority, creating humiliating inequalities that preclude human community.

Education systems imposed on the world by colonial regimes and their missionary partners also call for collaborative efforts to mount a massive transformational effort guided by a quest for global equity for a healthy planet. Rich countries that are beneficiaries of historical inequities and their ongoing privileges need to acknowledge their co-responsibilities. Contributions of an equitable share of global resources to the transformation effort, as well as a shift in the mindsets from rich countries' current model of political and economic dominance of low-income

countries, are essential for greater global equity. Concerted systematic collaborative efforts could turn this moment of existential crisis into an opportunity for a historic global push to secure the future for generations to come.

What steps should we take?

Fundamental transformation requires the following minimum steps:

- 1. Acknowledge that the current global development model is fatally flawed and needs radical change;**
- 2. Redefine development to reflect a living systems approach; and**
- 3. Redefine humanity's relationship with energy by learning from nature's regenerative systems.**

1. Acknowledge that the current global development model is flawed

The current global development model and institutional architecture are legacies of the victors of the Second World War, who imposed political economic models that secured their continued dominance. The success of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Monetary Fund in the reconstruction of post-war Europe and stabilisation of financial systems of Western countries gave the victors reason to assume their model was appropriate for development worldwide.

Development is not a process that is done to people. Development is an organic process that every individual, family, community and nation undertakes to enhance their capabilities to engage with the challenges and opportunities that life presents.

Embedded in this model is the imposition of the US dollar as the standard global development currency. This imposition usurped the right of sovereign nations to develop and use their own currencies at home and abroad without paying exchange commissions and having their currencies manipulated by speculators. Poor countries suffer this foreign currency imposition beyond the dollar in both trade and credit transactions that inevitably lead to high debt levels. In the case of former French colonies in West Africa, a descendant of the French franc is still the dominant currency, perpetuating the influence of the French Central Bank over their fiscal affairs. A greater form of neo-colonial control one cannot imagine.

The imposition of universal narratives of development undermines the right of most of the world's nations and societies to cultivate their own development models that could otherwise leverage the winning combination of ancient wisdom and modern science. Bottom-up development that puts people and communities at the centre has been replaced by standards set by dominant powers about what is, and is not, development. Development is not a process that is done to people. Development is an organic process that every individual, family, community and nation undertakes to enhance their capabilities to engage with the challenges and opportunities that life presents.

Human development is a process of unleashing the talents and potential of all people and communities. Society's role is to create the conditions for this process to unfold in line with the special attributes and learning approaches of each person. The growing awareness of an individual's place as a human being within the web of life enables them to contribute to their ecosystem. Education and learning processes need to be transformed into spaces for listening, conversations and co-creation of action plans to advance wellbeing for all.

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The current language of “developed” and “developing” countries carries major assumptions of superiority and inferiority that are unhelpful to the quest for global equity for a healthy planet. A few dominant former colonising countries with an industrial revolution mindset have sought to define what is developed or underdeveloped or what are emerging countries or regions. Their definition of development is based on a linear industrialisation model using gross domestic product (GDP) growth as a measure of success. GDP growth is the limitless pursuit of greater and greater consumption of goods and services by a minority at the expense of the majority and our living planet.

This GDP growth frenzy is controlled by a few dominant players who have also declared themselves referees in the market. It is becoming clear for most people that the unsustainability of this financialised global economic system creates winners and losers at every turn. Debt financing is at the heart of this system and rating agencies are its enablers. Repeated global financial crises, the most recent of which was in 2008, have exposed over and over the unreliability of “credit risk” assessments. Business as usual continues. Pursuit of short-term gains and the insatiable hunger of financial institutions for more and more assets, whether real or imagined, preoccupy many. The Club of Rome advocates for new measures of progress in line with living-systems approaches and with a focus on wellbeing for all for a healthy planet.

The more aggressive drive for globalisation since the end of the 20th century has further undermined community-level relationships and respect for pluriversal narratives that reflect peoples' languages, culture, beliefs and values. The World Trade Organization's role in regulating global trade has created more opportunities for dominant powers to impose their will on poorer and weaker nations. The food systems in poor countries suffered the most damage from the imposition of industrial food production processes in both high- and lower-income countries. This has caused untold damage to indigenous land use and stewardship systems.

For example, many governments have overturned indigenous traditional land use frameworks that prohibited turning land into a commodity. These indigenous systems had ensured that land remained a public good to be held by current generations as stewards for future generations' benefit. The same value system governed responsible custodianship of forests, soil and water resources. Indigenous cultural values reflect the understanding that land was there before the human species: the Earth owns us as a species depending on its generous gifts, rather than us owning it.

The introduction of aggressive use of fertilisers and sterile seeds by industrialised agriculture in pursuit of profits has undermined resilient indigenous grains and other healthier foods. This process has led to extinction of indigenous grains, causing hardships and food insecurity. Unhealthy diets with refined industrial foods continue to undermine the wellbeing of poor rural people. Industrial agriculture has severely damaged the regenerative capacity of ecosystems globally. Regenerative agriculture can only thrive with a commitment by dominant powers to halt degenerative practices and to restore what they have damaged. Such restorative work needs to be financed by those responsible, as well as being supported by the rest of humanity.

2. Redefine development

We need to redefine development as a process of self-development to enable each person to meet their inner self and befriend their strengths and weaknesses. Self-knowledge is essential to building trust that enhances engagements with others in the family, community and wider

society. Development should be seen as a process of learning anew how to be human as interconnected and interdependent beings that prosper through mutual affirmation. Sustainable development seen in this light is a process of creating the conditions for individuals, communities and society to listen to one another and have conversations about how to address common problems and challenges. Conversations in such contexts build trust, trust builds community, and communities with strong trust relationships are more likely to agree on actions that promote wellbeing for all and for their ecosystems.

The education that dominates the world today needs urgent radical transformation. Industrial revolution imperatives of aggressive extractive economics to secure material and cheap labour have shaped the world's education system. That system undermined and discounted indigenous cultures and heritage. We need to reboot the holism at the centre of all indigenous belief systems and their cultural manifestation to replace linear-thinking

models. Through intergenerational conversations, we can revitalise the learning and initiation of young people into adult roles. Self-knowledge that generates self-confidence unleashes everyone's potential to become critical-thinking community members contributing to the wellbeing of all. Collaboration needs to replace competition.

It is encouraging to meet young professionals, entrepreneurs and civil activists who are increasingly demanding systems of learning aligned to their aspirations and values as interconnected interdependent beings. They refuse to choose between their careers and their aspirations for values-based lifestyles. They are also insisting on participatory systems of governance with co-imagining, co-creation and collaborative implementation of agreed plans of action. They reject competitiveness even within business schools and corporations as violating their values. They are ready to lead with the next generations in mind.

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People are also challenging the patriarchal systems dominant in Western countries. Men and women in traditional societies demand dignity in their own distinctive roles as partners in families and communities. Younger generations are reviving and celebrating matriarchal systems that once characterised much of Africa. They are acclaiming property relationships that regard land not as a tradable commodity but as a resource to hold in trust for future generations. Women must return to their roles as the seed keepers in indigenous communities for the benefit of rebalancing the responsibilities of men and women for greater gender equity and trust building.

This generation of young people is also paying attention to the legacy of industrial-scale trans-Atlantic slavery, migrant labour systems within Africa and multiple colonial and world wars that disrupted the lives of millions of families and left scars on countless numbers of people. We know from neuroscience today that inter-generational trauma often manifests as dysfunctionality in later generations. Disruptions of family and community life continue to manifest as gender inequities and unspeakable gender-based violence for most people in the world today. Restoring women's right to control their bodies and fertility is a holistic process that will take time.

3. Redefine our relationship with energy

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There is an urgent need for a mindset shift regarding our relationship with energy. Current high energy use reflects the lifestyles of the rich with unsustainable consumption patterns. The structures of our built environments and land use are designed for inefficient energy usage. Contrast the energy efficiency of most traditional architecture in many indigenous cultures. Many are built in harmony with the ecosystems in which they are embedded, preferring circular structures as stronger and more enduring and using natural roofing materials that minimise temperature variation and wastage of water resources. Modern high-rise glass office complexes and sprawling residential properties are anything but energy efficient. Imagine how much energy we could conserve by learning from nature's intelligence!

In *Building the Future of Innovation on millions of years of Natural Intelligence* (2020), Leen Gorissen details case studies of businesses that are harvesting the benefits of nature-inspired designs and material use (Gorissen, 2020). The same applies to transport and other essential public service systems. Transformation in the energy domain should not only be a matter of replacing fossil fuels with renewables but should also reflect a radical shift in our relationships with energy and its use.

Three recommendations for transformative change

1. Transform education

From early years, throughout school and beyond we must ensure that the next generations become well-informed, critical and creative thinkers and creative citizens of the 21st century. Harvesting nature's intelligence is key to shifting mindsets towards futures as interconnected, interdependent beings and working together to secure wellbeing for all in a global community committed to equity for a healthy planet.

The good news is that there are numerous pilots and established programmes that model this approach adapted to different cultural and geographic settings. The LEAP Schools in South Africa have successfully demonstrated that every child is a genius, given the opportunity of self-liberation and confidence-building to develop their potential and talents. Their success has led to the establishment of the LEAP Institute to facilitate diffusion of the model across Southern Africa with the help of international and local partners.

The Tamkeen Community Foundation for Human Development in Tangiers, Morocco, promotes development based on human rights. It uses local research and capacity-building on a range of issues related to political participation and seeks to increase understanding of a rights-based and participatory approach. Young people emerge with new capabilities, skills and ideas as well as the ability to influence change in all areas. The Foundation's success in Morocco has led to the diffusion of its ideas to Yemen, Tunisia and other Arab countries.

Despite growing up under Francisco Franco's dictatorial leadership, Spanish architecture student Fernando Prats was inspired by reading *The Limits to Growth* in 1972. He worked with others to establish the FUHEM school system. The system is community-based, run and funded by parents with public support for core costs. Teachers in the school are steeped in the values of social justice and the freedom of people to learn in their own ways and to build on their strengths to develop their full potential. The school system has grown from strength to strength, spreading its approach to the conventional wider national system.

Programme founders of the above case studies are active participants in learning networks supported by The Club of Rome across the globe, including [#LearningPlanet](#) Platform, and Ubuntu Maths and Learning Movement. The exciting features of these models is that they not only train transformative leaders, but both men and women in these programmes are liberated from the toxic masculinity that fuels gender-based violence and denies women the right to control their bodies. Graduates are also leaders in their communities and wider society, leading with the next generations in mind.

On the higher education level, transformational change is underway in some institutions. Through the work of Anne Snick, a member of The Club of Rome, KU Leuven University in Belgium three years ago introduced approaches to learning that enable participants to learn by themselves in collaboration with their peers. The role of the teacher in this model is to facilitate access to learning resources online, in libraries or other places where they can have conversations that trigger learning opportunities. The disruptive impact of COVID-19 on face-to-face encounters has created greater opportunities for learners to manage their own learning

processes beyond traditional classroom encounters, and most importantly, across and beyond academic disciplines. Students from the first cohort have become facilitators for subsequent classes in an example of learner-driven learning.

Another transformative institution, the Learning Planet Institute (formerly the CRI), Paris, emerged out of the frustration of its founder, François Taddei, with conventional schooling that discouraged his six-year-old son from asking too many questions. He quit his job as a professor at Paris University to establish the Centre de Recherche Interdisciplinaire (CRI), which has since become an open learning platform for learners from school dropouts to PhDs. The Learning Planet Institute creates conditions for people to learn from the foundations of self-knowledge. It builds self-confidence and a willingness to learn with others so students can become the best versions of themselves. There are no disciplinary boundaries in their learning programmes. This open learning has transformed so-called “failed young people” into creative innovators who are able to tackle any community or societal problem with an open mind.

The success of the Learning Planet Institute after more than a decade so impressed the French government with its cost-effectiveness and creativity that they asked one of the senior leaders, Gaël Mainguy, to help transform higher education research programmes. Learning Planet Institute leaders have also founded the [#LearningPlanet](#) platform, in which The Club of Rome participates. The question we need to ask next is how can The Club of Rome and its partners leverage these models to create a global learning transformative movement?

2. Transform economics and finance

The rentier system – nations whose economies are dependent on rent as revenue from foreign sources, rather than increases in domestic productivity – that has spread its tentacles across the globe is impoverishing the many for the benefit of a few.

The unsustainable monopoly game of the global financialised economic model needs to be called out and halted. The rentier system – nations whose economies are dependent on rent as revenue from foreign sources, rather than increases in domestic productivity – that has spread its tentacles across the globe is impoverishing the many for the benefit of a few. The so-called market needs to be unmasked for what it is: a self-serving platform for those who have gamed the system as both players and referees.

We need to overhaul the reckless institutional architecture that has led to multiple global finance crises, tax avoidance and externalised national resources from the poorest countries to tax havens. Leaks beginning with the Panama Papers and the many subsequent “Papers” provide evidence of the extent of the abuse. Banks in London, Switzerland and other jurisdictions with money stolen by corrupt leaders need to repatriate those funds for programmes to advance greater equity and a healthy planet. The UN and trusted institutions might need to establish a suitable agency to oversee the identification and repatriation of the stolen money and set up criteria of programmes to fund and monitor and evaluate their implementation.

We should lobby policymakers to break up corporate monopolies among international audit firms, their legal partners and rating agencies who are biased in favour of high-income countries, while penalising small countries to keep them under control. We must also reimagine banks without the insatiable hunger for assets that fuels credit-based financing.

The imposition of foreign-denominated transactions on most of the world's poor countries needs to be challenged. Poor countries need breathing space to use their own local currencies for national and international exchange of goods and services. Africa needs to rise to the challenge and implement the Integrated Trade Agreement to enhance regional collaboration and trade. Over time an African currency might emerge as the Afro.

There is also the possibility of introducing an Islamic banking system as an alternative banking system. Nigeria is already doing it. South African banks such as ABSA and Standard Bank also cater for clients who prefer this model. Islamic banking is based on Sharia law, which prohibits interest charges on debt. Such debt has been the fuel for the runaway fire that is the conventional financial services sector. In the Islamic banking system, loans are extended based on trusting relationships between the partners, in a manner that enables payments for the loan through profit-sharing arrangements and other variations. Both parties are responsible for the successful execution of the transaction for the shared benefit.

Many indigenous communities across the globe use savings clubs built along similar lines. It is worth examining how to encourage this in community-based economies where trust can be built and leveraged. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, founded on trust and solidarity by Muhammad Yunus, earned him a Nobel Prize in 2006. The bank has lifted thousands of women from abject poverty. It has been a major player in shifting the financial services sector in Bangladesh and inspired many other communities in Asia to follow suit. The DHAN Foundation in south India has also done amazing work for close to two decades, building trust and solidarity based on self-help development programmes among the poorest women of the Dalit Scheduled Caste.

South Africa also has a Stokvel movement with an estimated 50 billion South African rand (£2.54 billion) in savings that circulate in communities in both urban and rural poor areas. Unfortunately, big banks have already captured 12 billion South African rand (£610 million) of this cash. In exchange for nominal interest, the banks move the money to the “real economy”, which excludes the people who own the savings. Bolivia's Rotating Savings and Credit Associations have for decades catered to those excluded from the dominant financial system and build on the same community-based trust and solidarity approach.

The question is how can we give systemic support to these community networks built on trust and solidarity to enable them to resist capture by the conventional extractive financial system? What role can the Rethinking Finance and Reframing Economics initiatives of The Club of Rome play in the urgently needed transformation of the global financialised economic system? Promoting global equity for a healthy planet is not possible without this transformation.

We need to become indigenous again with community-based economic systems involving local production and consumption needs. We should revive reciprocal exchanges of surpluses with neighbouring communities to ensure wellbeing for all and protection of ecosystems. The model

of interlinked village communities restores a sense of place and belonging and is a critical factor for enabling global equity for a healthy planet.

3. Transform energy systems

Critics of the current commitments to net-zero by 2050 and beyond are raising pertinent issues that we need to take into consideration if we are to add value to the systems change needed

in the international energy sector. The critical questions are how humanity shifts radically from overconsumption of energy, exits fossil fuel and accelerates the reduction of carbon and other harmful gas emissions.

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OxI-ZEN founder Christopher Mbanefo, a member of The Club of Rome, has examined how the existing carbon market – now dominated by some of the biggest emitters – could be transformed into a more open, transparent and accountable market. For example, the global carbon market operates like a game with a loaded dice. Estimated terrestrial sequestration prices favour temperate forests that currently have less than 31% of available capacity to sequester carbon compared with 69% of tropical forests. Carbon prices in exchanges in the United States, China and Australia are 45 euro (£37.76) per tonne, far higher than the US\$5 (£3.84) per tonne offered to low-income countries. In addition, high-income countries are making huge investments in carbon emission reduction technologies while neglecting low-income countries providing ecological services for the entire global community.

We need a new system that promotes greater equity by creating incentives for poor communities and countries to better protect and promote terrestrial and marine carbon sinks such as mature forests and wetlands in residential and other land use areas.

A transparent system should have the following elements:

- Participants have incentives and means to protect and enhance carbon sinks
- Emitters and governments can clearly and transparently assess carbon dioxide (CO₂) balancing needs
- Carbon pricing based on real-time global situations
- Environmental, social and governance criteria; positive social impact measures
- Yield per hectare can be compared with competing land usage

An effective transparent carbon sequestration market is in the global interest. Promises of net zero at COP26 make no sense unless accompanied by concerted efforts to sequester the carbon already in the air and causing the planetary crises we face. We need a transparent, trustworthy and independent mechanism to re-engineer our ineffectual carbon markets into a system that can inspire confidence that global equity for a healthy planet is achievable.

Conclusion

There can be very little progress towards global equity for a healthy planet if we continue to address living-systems change in a linear, sequential manner. We can only make progress by seeing the five turnarounds as interrelated challenges that require holistic transformative approaches. If we do, we can seize great opportunity from the multiple emergencies facing society.

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Earth4All is an international initiative to accelerate the systems changes we need for an equitable future on a finite planet. Combining the best available science with new economic thinking, Earth4All was designed to identify the transformations we need to create prosperity for all. Earth4All was initiated by The Club of Rome, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Norwegian Business School. It builds on the legacies of The Limits to Growth and the planetary boundaries frameworks.

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