

A Vision and Style of Inquiry for: Practicing Commons Sense

“The commons” is what serves mankind as a whole, vital for our sustenance, social cohesion and well-being. It includes the natural environment that is our host on earth that people all use and change, inherit and create, a storehouse for the artifacts we transmit to future generations. It provides us life and resources, but also a place to use as a medium of exchange for all the networks of things people can do for each other, including cooperative institutions for serving competitive enterprise, free expression and our duty to preserve the grace and beauty as well as the generosity of the earth.

It's an inheritance, one that all humans now need a living vision of and a feeling of common responsibility for. Our cultures may have evolved to make us cooperating members of conflict oriented societies, being domesticated to serve authoritarian rulers, but we can see that won't work anymore and have to find the pieces of another way to live.

The commons take various shapes [At the same time object - process - output]

- The 'Assets' - The Common Wealth, inherited or created that are shared in common and serve a livelihood (natural, social & cultural resources, genetic and biologic diversity, knowledge, etc.) that people can take care of, nurture, replenish
- A culture - The Common Ethos, ways of being and doing in common that manifests in commoning (caring, sharing, in connection with others with empathy, equity, justice, mindfulness...)
- A resultant - The Common Good (wellbeing, quality of life, prosperity, abundance)

They are at the same time an input to the dynamic interactions between people, contexts and resources, and an output thereof. A tangible condition that serves as a medium for economic and political cooperation, development of common social and cultural values, and the establishment of a shared stewardship of the earth that can be deployed in nested and/or fractal ways at multiple levels and scales. For progress to materialize, output must be greater than input. Commons must grow.

What clear opportunity makes a new commons approach possible today?

- Many of the pieces needed are already in place and we can grow our ability to see and communicate the need to put them together.
- Everyone see clearly how our competing for growing shares of the earth is impoverishing the earth for ourselves as well as everyone else.
- The business community is full of people who have “done the math” and see the growing liabilities for their impacts as unprofitable.
- The financial community is full of people who see the need for their money to be used to make the world work, not fail.
- The social networks too, have made common purpose their organizing mantra all over the world, and only need solid material to make them effective.
- The sciences are full of people learning to work more like investigative journalists than as theorists, to see research as for illuminating their subjects not replacing them with theory, so mankind can better understand the working parts of our world actively changing. A simple principle of new science is how easy it is to physically measure the impacts of \$1. It's fairly accurate as one equal share; one equal share of both all the wealth and all the harm humans are creating. How you use it matters.

These complementary parts seem ineffective today mostly for being disconnected. So now is the time for a guiding vision, for learning how to search for the matching parts as the solution, and the system itself will start putting them all together.

The living commons as a guiding image for a socio-cultural shift

A living commons approach brings sustainability and resilience to another level adding dimensions of mutuality, common interest and a vision of the whole where mankind is meant to thrive. It can speak to our logic and reason as much as to our intuitions and emotions.

As such it constitutes a relevant transition informing image for the socio-cultural shift that our world requires, and to accumulate and amplify the patterns and behaviors that are already emerging.

The Changing Image of man survey from the Stanford research institute lists the following characteristics for a transition informing principle:

- *provide a holistic sense and perspective on life*
- *entail an ecological ethic*
- *entail a self-realization ethic*
- *be multileveled, multifaceted, and integrative*
- *lead to a balancing and coordinating of satisfactions along many dimensions*
- *be experiential, experimental and open-ended*

To which we can add the principles of adaptation of Complex living systems in the physical world :

- *A multiplicity of wholes in partnership forming an emergent whole*
- *Patterns of behaviors emergent in each whole, and visible externally even when its 'operating system' is hidden from sight*
- *Each whole self-organizing and self-realizing while being conscious of and responsive to each other's behaviors*
- *Each whole locally responsive to our dramatically changeable knowledge and living world*
- *Emergent patterns at the local level that can converge and accumulate into systemic change*
- *Possibilities for convergence and amplification of positive feedback dependent on tightness of relationships*
- *Change made continuous by successions of interactions and relationships*

The transition informing image of the living commons is able to materialize a need and possibilities for change giving meaning and direction to changes emerging locally. Thus it is able to attract and catalyze possibilities, producing a resonance of potential and action with both the context people find themselves in and the rules that govern it so that self-organized emerging change can lead to continuous radical change...

This synthesis focuses on the conditions, amplifying actions, and ongoing dynamics needed to enable the process described above to occur.

The commons sense

In the past, environmental efforts concentrated on protecting the earth's "special places", and most attention grabbing problems. These efforts protected only selected parts of the commons, as threats to the whole grew unabated. A different approach is needed to counter the forces that exerts ever increasing pressure on all parts of humanity and the earth at once. A thriving commons requires no parts to be excluded from attention, to assure local solutions don't create global conflict and global activities don't create local and regional conflict.

We need a whole system approach not a piecemeal approach, one that enables all parts to thrive while addressing the threat that itself is not piecemeal, but to the whole at once.

Awareness of the needs of the commons, as what all parts share a need for, starts with each part discovering how it uses and depends of the whole and how it can contribute to keep the whole viable and thriving.

To set this type of approach in motion, we need to work toward the systemic level with a transition informing process concentrating on a set of guiding principles, contextual conditions and a few leverage points susceptible of generating the insight and positive feedback loops that will seed the emergence of radical change.

Our recommendations seek to describe the dynamic interactions that help build the social and material resiliency necessary for the development of a thriving economic and social fabric, allowing at the same time for various unintended consequences of human action, and for recovery from natural disasters, pandemics, etc.. They also look into what enables an economic balance between member communities, ensuring rule of common law and accountability underpinned by monitoring and evaluation systems. A critical element is the establishment of a framework for enabling learning, conversation, evaluation in view of decisions and conflict resolution, in a way that can scale horizontally (P2P) and vertically (subsidiarity).

Local organization for local needs [P2P, many to many]

Principle: Communities must be encouraged to cultivate and produce their own livelihoods and co-govern their utilities, services and resources, in relational dynamics that foster self-realization and adaptation.

Emergence: A variety of innovative, creative small and local initiatives and projects are actively pursuing alternative and more sustainable forms of agriculture, industrial production, social and economic organization, currencies and credit systems, education, (self-)governance, and ways of life. At the edge we find the collaborative and P2P economy.

Amplifiers: Communities, groups and individuals develop a sense of ownership of the process, a sense of immediacy and transparency, of shared destiny and emotional experience that foster trust and resilience, and a shared 'commons sense'. Local collaboration and peer to peer (P2P) dependencies are something graspable and immediate, and also expand awareness of what empowers one another and larger systems, creating channels by which they can discover opportunity and be brought into balance.

Positive feedback: Continual community learning about how those regional systems work should be encouraged and supported. This is key to sustaining the complexity of larger scales of integration, and the specialization of remote services that empowers them. Then trust, co-creation and co-governance practice and working skills develop at each scale, and so also spread to the whole in a distributed manner. This encourages conflict resolution and transparency approaches. It develops a sense of enduring responsibility for the commons and roles shared with future generations.

Coordinated Regional Emergency Interventions

Application: An immediate application would be to promote the use and testing of these innovative methods and initiatives in 'innovation zones' established in areas damaged by disasters, or to reverse damage caused by past and current practice. Promote the study of how interventions affect each scale of the systems they take place in. Responding to the threats of disasters, cultural and technological dislocations, as a need to develop resiliency and adaptability, and so also anticipating, avoiding and allowing more effective response, should all be encouraged and funded, now aimed at making the commons work more smoothly as a whole too. Projects directly aimed at relieving the growth of

crippling debt without continued growth of demands on the earth are inseparable from reducing emissions, reversing desertification, soil erosion, deforestation, overfishing, increased disparity between rich and poor, corruption, abuse of power.

Expanding cooperation at higher levels and wider scales [subsidiarity principle]

Subsidiarity is an organizing principle stating that a matter ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralized authority capable of addressing that matter effectively, and that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.

Principle: Learning from grassroots community practices and early adopters, fostering growing awareness in each locality of the nature of local and global integration. This would draw from the people-context-interactions- assets-culture-resultant dynamic that defines and powers local relationships to the commons, and enable scaling vertically from there.

Emergence: Simple principles for a more realistic and purposeful science of economics and management for an animated world, drawing from "systems intervention", "action learning", "systems thinking" and "whole system assessment" practices, among others, to deal with the systemic complexity of the relationships and the shift required.

Amplifiers: Promoting "connections" conversations to help build on interactions and facilitate integrated shifts in larger and smaller scale practices allowing stakeholders to discover new ways to solve their mutual problems. Adopt appreciative methods of enquiry and conflict resolution, being open to seeing things as they are, to experiment, learn and adjust. Encourage questioning, learning, discovery and innovation, and our capacity to bootstrap, to invent seeds of change, plant and nurture them, and evolve. Find ways to work together and actively engage in learning processes that enable co-creation and co-governance and conflict resolution on all scales.

Positive feedback: Expanding from the above on the "whole system" approach to learn from example, to mimic the conflict-free self-organization observable in natural economic systems, and other "exemplars" recognized good design; to observe patterns of behaviors emerging and to recognize change as it unfolds, so that theory is always checked against reality of what is observed and emerges, and new learning can be integrated and made applicable.

Application: This includes finding the boundaries and governance principles best suited to the needs of the commons at local levels (subsidiarity), acknowledging multiple logically or physically overlapping or intersecting commons, and devising more practical means of enforcement for laws, treaties, and agreements at all levels by making them confirmations of nested and/or fractal common needs.

A Commons Sector, alongside the Private and public sectors

Principle: Reinforcing and developing a sector of the commons alongside the private and public sectors, conferring rights and responsibilities to communities over resources on which they depend. There is no question here of ending private property or the role of the state. Rather it is to establish a provision for 'sanctuarizing' within appropriately governed institutions a certain number of commons from public or private overexploitation and enclosure to ensure access when exploitation and enclosure for the pursuit of profit impinges on the rights or livelihoods of the users of the commons or the viability of the common. The most obvious examples are the air we breathe or the human or natural genome, the internet is another. Defining modalities would be in the political realm.

Emergence: New forms of cooperatively or mutually governed organizations to steward the commons at various levels, starting with the enforcement of existing common law.

Amplifiers: The commons must be acknowledged as the foundation of the collaborative free markets needed for the health of competitive free markets, enabled by effective education systems, research and development programs, and universal telecommunications infrastructure that enable distributed networks to operate mutual sense making and exchanges of all kinds.

Positive feedback: This would prevent the double risk of 'Tragedy of the commons' either from overexploitation by individual parts detrimental to the whole or from private enclosure and appropriation for the benefit of the few. This would ensure that the people who have a long-term stake in the preservation of these resources (natural, physical, intellectual, social, cultural; from local to global) would protect them while enabling the development of a flourishing commons-based economy around them.

Application: This may include linking and embedding the commons in existing systems such as the international commons of Outer Space, Antarctica and the Law of the Sea.> See approaches here: Blueprint for P2P society by Michel Bauwens, 'Stewardship Corporations' by Jack Harich; Commons Trusts and Social Charters developed by James Quilligan and the Global Commons Trust.

Transition to a circular economy

Our economy's current purpose is to maximize flows (of goods, capital). It is a machine for perpetual growth that uses its profits and its knowledge to continually escalate its demands on humanity and on the earth and to constantly multiply its capacity to inflate itself as private wealth and power. As such, it is brittle and prone to breakdown, undermining productive activity as well as leading to the abuse of the commons in a never ending spiral.

Principle: The challenge we are facing is to ensure the conditions under which profit and growth can be viable and sustainable, and improve at the same time the material and non-material (intellectual, emotional, spiritual...) wellbeing of the people, and the viability of the commons that enables it.

Emergence: The "circular economy" model focuses on optimizing the flow of goods and services over time in relation to the size of capital and resources (stocks). It is a replenishing and regenerative model based on closed loops and systems resilience, and the rebuilding of natural and social capital. Products are designed for more complex cycles of disassembly and reuse, the out-design of waste and toxic emissions.

Amplifiers: Introducing clarity between consumables and durables, it puts the responsibility of the performance of the product and its becoming as a new resource at the end of its life on the producers, leading to a whole new approach of production, consumption and ownership as it encourages leasing, renting and sharing while giving way to new approaches of business co-evolution and integration of the commons.

Positive feedback: The circular economy can contribute to create a positive entrainment effect. In the economic sphere there is an acknowledgement that as externalised costs become internalised benefits prices will increasingly reveal full costs. This entails a natural shift towards renewables and internalization of externalities. In systems terms the system will be exhibiting increased interdependence and the use of different scales, niches and possibilities. See The circular Economy and the Compression Institute.

Application: In the spirit of circular economy closed loop urbanization and community utility & production systems and projects and initiatives that have multiple effects, and serve several different objectives, such as co-generation, closed water/energy/food production systems or solutions such as developed by the Blue Economy or systemic approaches around buildings/energy/transport should be encouraged. More generally, sustainability as "circular economy", also involves that whatever available resource or asset businesses or other economic actors don't use, other parts of their environment can, with mutual benefits. This includes local policies to make use of idle resources to strengthen local economies.

Use finance to grow the commons.

Principle: The transition to a circular economy for the investment and financial commons must start at **natural limits to profitable growth and for vitality and balance**, sustaining investment profitability and guiding investors to higher purposes for their profits than putting money into the productive economy to take growing amounts out of it. The world economy doesn't yet have a "purpose" to live better, only to grow and grow even as it becomes unprofitable, brittle and toxic; ignoring a natural need for "maturation", time to turn our attention from inward to outward.

Emergence: The practical transition is for investors of all kinds to find higher purposes for their profits, such as healing both their world and environment, avoiding direct liability for growing hidden impacts, and in the spirit of the commons and well-being. Developing some responsiveness to the emerging and unexpected needs of their environment, and ready to explore errors and omissions in their own teachings and past conclusions, that

living in a changing world may make important. See articles A biomimicry for self-regulating commons and Self Organization as niche making_ The Giving Pledge is a move in this direction, that needs to be adequately channelled...

Amplifiers: More trivially, shifts from taxing income to taxing depletion of commons such as non renewable resources and waste will reinforce this, as will real world commodities and energy price rises. The removal of perverse subsidies which promote extraction over regeneration or stock over flow would add impetus.

Positive feedback: Since money and money as debt is an endogenous variable in the whole game an unaltered financial sector undermines efforts and money will work best as a medium of exchange (issued debt free). Other ideas include the use of negative interest rates to promote long term investment in productive activities (see Bernard Lietaer) as against the compound growth driver which is compound interest that systemically reduces future value to negligible.

Stop growing toxic and harmful practices

Application: This process can be accelerated by identifying and targeting investment practices that systemically undermine productive activity and future prospects, such as speculative manipulation of finance instruments and resource shortages, mechanisms causing systemic credit and asset bubbles, development of addictive appetites of various nature at the cost of public, environmental and financial health, the promotion of faster use of depleting resources serving to increase not decrease the economy's dependence on them, etc. These are both some of the most profitable investments and increase rapidly as people take the profits from them to inflate their investment in them. This include creating incentives, regulations and taxes and eliminating subsidies and loopholes that encourage these practices.

>> As a leverage point: to remedy the above reinforce and enforce anti-corruption laws and eliminate 'legal' corruption and political manipulation by banning or strongly limiting the use of private funds for political financing and political speech. See: (Larry Lessig, the founder of creative commons is campaigning against this see Republic Lost, Jack Harich's study of political power.

Methods of assessment and reporting

Promote transparency and reporting for monitoring and evaluation systems. Create metrics to measure impacts and outcomes, that measure each part's demand on and contribution to the whole, and not just local visible effects. Provide open access to knowledge, data, and information to allow

comparative studies and the correction of misconceptions. Promote a general knowledge commons, and creative commons, allowing all to see inside the silos of others so their different views of common subjects, their values and ideas, can be understood and connected. Share methods for recognizing irreversible processes and anticipating their tipping points of transformation as well as recognizing seeds of change and anticipation of limits of change. Set up processes to ensure that what follows is right and continues to be right, exploring means of confirmation, and a meta-process of reflection and evaluation of measures. Enable trial and error and the possibilities to readjust. Respond to the abuse of misleading and selective metrics and evaluation systems, defining subjects with only selective variables, and generally assure the fidelity of information to its subjects and their changes. Apply rules of fiduciary duty to the speech of corporations and lobbyists, to be liable for being misleading about the true interests of their investors, customers, employees and other stakeholders, as having natural concerns for their own and their society's wellbeing. See Jay Youngdahl's expansion of fiduciary law at Harvard.

Frameworks and platforms [tightening connections - amplifying positive feedback]

These approaches would be well supported with frameworks and platforms to deal with the systemic complexity of the relationships and the shift required. A platform would help the various problematiques and existing initiatives to be made visible to each other and encouraged in the context of a global sustainability & resilience objective, and to connect the dots in order to help people pull and pool resources and collaborate to grow what works for them and for the common good. It would enable learning, exchange of knowledge and experience, engagement, coordination of cooperation and action, and evaluation, debate, deliberation, decisions of specific projects or outcomes. Ultimately this could facilitate the first steps and adjustments of the formation of commons governance systems that would where required enable the creation of new institutions. (see A Global Framework)

Ultimately, such frameworks and platforms could be an instrument for the transition. It would provide the support for the embodied characteristics of the transition informing principle listed above and the signs of emerging change to become visible as interconnected in a whole. It would enable the discovery of possibilities and the application of solutions at multiple levels throughout the cycles of the transition:

- setting up sensors for detection and sense-making;
- understanding issues and what is at stake across silos;
- inspiring, empowering, enabling people to collaboration and action;
- facilitating deliberation and implementation;
- providing means for horizontal (P2P sharing) and vertical (subsidiarity principle) scaling of processes
- diffusing, applying, improving, sustaining solutions
- monitoring performance, accountability, early detection of new issues and feedback

All this in an emergent manner. (See platform project)

Thank you Jessie Henshaw, David Price, Thoeboern Mann, Nicolas Stampf, Mary Saunders, TA Balasubramanian, Ken Webster, Douwe Jan Joustra, Dawna Jones, David Alman, Bill Williams, Bill Smith, Dan Strongin, Nick Ananin, KK Aw, David Hawk, Vlad Kunko, Eero Hollming, Patric Roberts, Gene Bellinger, George Por, Jack Harich, James Quilligan, Michel Bauwens, Irma Wilson, Bonnitta Roy, Erika Ilves and all the participants to this and other discussions.

The various individual and small group outputs of the discussion is available here. This conversation and the LinkedIn group discussion format highlighted how difficult it is to capture and harvest collective intelligence to reiterate and reprocess its content effectively, other than doing it 'by hand' in real time... A

new tool has been put very recently at our disposal to search and mine the richness of this discussion. Don't hesitate to contact me if you have suggestions.

Another output in the past months is a pealtree map of the alternatives viewed via wikipedia for a start. Many of the concepts explained here can be found on the 'exploring the alternatives' pearltree I started last month: <http://www.pearltrees.com/t/team/id5509379>

1. *These notes are inspired from a group discussion addressing the question from UN Secretary General on an Economic Model for survival, in discussion since Feb 2011 on the LinkedIn "Systems Thinking World" forum. 6500+ posts. It builds upon the intents of "Commons based economic models" submitted to the 2012 RioDialogues.org process and the various articles on the commons I have posted here. This is a work in progress written in collaboration with Jessie Henshaw, that seeks to look at the commons and our transitioning to a more sustainable and resilient model in a systemic way. I welcome your comments and suggestions.*
-

Temp cuts –

A culture of responsiveness to a world full of individually changing and behaving parts.
A way of investigating problems that illuminates whole systems and working parts our own and nature's other cultures, not for arriving at theories or correcting symptoms.
A habit of continual learning as an intimate relationship with the animated parts ever in search of new rules.
Inspiring visions not as "goals" but to help one in searching for the parts that are ready to put together for building them.
Mistakes are your most valuable discoveries. Small beginnings