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# The mechanics of social change

Rarely before has society had to consider the prospect of changing its ways so wholly and quickly as it does with the currently emerging environmental priorities. On a global scale, it has never happened. The big question is how do we get society to quickly take a radically different path, and what are the mechanisms behind such a shift? **Matt Brace** provides a perspective.

A crescendo of opinion is calling for society to adopt a drastically more sustainable approach as soon as possible. The urgency of this call seems immediately led by the predicted effects of climate change, but is also fuelled by other environmental and social imperatives resulting from our global practices.

Where the atmosphere is concerned, based on increasingly accepted evidence that significant global warming is occurring because of humans' effects, many scientists, environmentalists, politicians and business people believe we have a mere 10-year window in which to implement significant changes to our practices and

thinking. Failure to do so, they say, leaves us open to the full effects of climate change and related environmental problems.

Much cooperative work is being done worldwide to examine the mechanisms of social change and how they can affect sustainability, which reveals the size of the challenge. Some academics have formed international research groups, like the Resilience Alliance,<sup>1</sup> which includes scientists from CSIRO as well as major universities and other scientific organisations in Australia, North America, Europe and South Africa.

The Regional Development Futures (RDF) framework developed by a multidis-

ciplinary group of scientists in Australia is being used to develop location-specific sustainability options.

According to Senior Research Scientist Dr Gail Kelly, from CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, 'regions are evolutionary and dynamic, and examining the notion of sustainability requires a new way of thinking about systems and communities. Improving the sustainability of a region must take into account the interconnections and interdependence of the economic, social, environmental and governance systems.'

'Sustainability is not about holding the status quo, nor about pushing specific

<sup>1</sup> The Resilience Alliance is a research organisation comprised of scientists and practitioners from many disciplines who collaborate to explore the dynamics of social-ecological systems: [www.resalliance.org](http://www.resalliance.org).

agendas. It is about a process of managing change and knowing when and how to initiate strategic change. Being more sustainable is about being better prepared for the future and applying systems thinking and participatory research approaches are essential for this to happen,' Dr Kelly said.

### Historical clues

Some researchers have examined the large changes in social thinking that have occurred in the past, predominantly during times of immediate peril such as wars, famines or plagues. In these cases, the threat has largely been immediately observable, like an approaching enemy, or the death of masses of citizens.

Richard Eckersley, a Visiting Fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University (ANU), and one of many academics working on the issues of social change, said big changes in attitudes such as the Renaissance or the Enlightenment were 'periods that saw profound shifts in our view of ourselves, in what it was to be human'.

'And flowing from these shifts, the great social and political movements of the 19th century shattered many assumptions of what was "normal" at that time: recurrent epidemics of typhoid and cholera, child labour, the buying and selling of human life, the oppressed status of women, the appalling working conditions in "dark, satanic mills",' said Mr Eckersley.

The difficulty with climate change, and other environmental threats requiring social rethinking, is that they are not easily visible. We find it hard to visualise rising sea levels or the hole in the ozone layer. Even striking research such as that released by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in October showing that the ozone hole over Antarctica currently measures 'the most serious [size] on record' – at least 28 million square kilometres – and is promising to reach a record size<sup>2</sup> this year, is not enough to make people immediately alter their behaviours, for example to drive their cars less. It could take the engulfing of waterfront suburbs in Sydney, Melbourne or Perth, or drastic temperature rises in Hobart causing the loss of lives, before we truly 'get' the problem. By then it could be too late to appreciably mitigate effects.

Examples of smaller, micro changes are

easier to find. Sean Kidney, CEO of Social Change On-line, an organisation enhancing social objectives, pointed out that after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the American Government forced industry to change tack dramatically.

'The US Government went to General Motors and other companies and told them to build more tanks and other military hardware,' he said.

'General Motors said "great, we'll open up a whole new plant". The government said "yes, but you'll convert your existing car plants as well". It took action by the government to force big industry to make the shift quickly. GM still prospered.'

### The \$64 million question

Mr Eckersley calls the identification and application of social change mechanisms the '\$64 million question'. He is addressing this issue with a team as part of an Australia 21 think-tank project.<sup>3</sup> In his book, *Well & Good*,<sup>4</sup> he said, 'Ultimately, we need to see the emergence of a new *Weltanschauung*: a new view of the world, a new framework of ideas within which to make choices and decisions.'

'Such a change would affect just about every facet of our private and public lives: how and why citizens vote, consumers buy, governments govern, public servants serve, and business does business.

'My sense is that if we removed growth – becoming ever richer, regardless of where and how – as the centrepiece of our world view, things would fall into place, the tensions would be resolved, a sense of coherence and balance would be restored. This sounds much simpler than it is. There is a huge social inertia that resists this change.'

Mr Eckersley asks if doubling personal wealth in 20 years in order to double consumption is our number one goal because 'for our governments, which we elect, it is'.

'This gives us an idea of the tensions being created by an increasingly outdated and dysfunctional *Weltanschauung*. It's time for a new one,' he said.

### Social change mechanisms

Individuals and organisations promoting social change on large and small scales have a number of mechanisms in their 'shift' arsenal. Broadly these are as follows:

**Fear** – Fear is superb at bringing threats



Richard Eckersley believes the old world view centred on consumption has become dysfunctional. ANU/Richard Eckersley

home to us in our living rooms. Few governments are immune from the charge of using fear and misinformation to manipulate their people. Environmental groups have also used this tactic to try to shake people into action by painting an apocalyptic portrait of the future of the world. Recently the film *An Inconvenient Truth* sought to present a rational kind of fear based on the urgency around scientific facts about climate change.

**Positive thought** – While fear is an important component in mechanisms for social change, increasingly lobbyists feel that doom and gloom has not had the



*An Inconvenient Truth* used scientific facts to create a sense of fear and urgency around the issue of climate change. Bloomsbury Press

<sup>2</sup> World Meteorological Organization, 3 October 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Australia 21 is a non-profit group whose core business is research and development on issues of strategic importance to Australia in the 21st century: <http://www.australia21.org.au/>.

<sup>4</sup> Eckersley R (2005). *Well & Good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness*. Text Publishing, Melbourne.



## F o c u s



Make Poverty History has become an increasingly influential change campaign in recent years.

Live 8

desired effect. They believe it might be time for a more positive message. Campaigners are eager to talk about the solution rather than the problem. As Mr Kidney surmised, 'You need a clear vision of the horror of climate change and what the alternative might look like: you do need to get people to sit bolt upright and say "bloody hell", but fear alone is de-motivating so it is crucial to have a story of hope as well. Potency comes with these two things together: fear and hope.'

**Targeted education** – UNICEF's Change for Good campaign has raised more than A\$55 million by providing envelopes in airline seat pockets educating passengers about world poverty and encouraging them to donate foreign coins and unwanted change. Closer to home, Sydney City Council's fuel-efficient 'smart cars' are better for the environment and a handy way of educating people in the street on the benefits of thinking greener. However, as Mr Kidney pointed out, identifying the target audience is sometimes extremely difficult. 'With climate change we are going to have to educate and mobilise specific groups who can facilitate change quite fast, but in a complex political landscape figuring out exactly who they are is one of the hardest things to do,' he said.

**Empowerment** – Empowerment is revolutionising the lives of the poor and dispossessed. One of the most successful systems is microfinance, which allows groups of people to be jointly responsible for the repayment of a personal loan,

**'Almost every single one [idea] comes from the citizen sector. They either lead the change processes or build on the strengths of existing ones. Governments tend not to be the leaders anymore but the very slow followers.'**

thereby providing financial services to the poor who are otherwise excluded by mainstream finance systems. Empowerment also has a sustainability application: in Brazil thousands of rural people have access to electricity for the first time, through innovative distributed solar energy systems.

**A clear solutions agenda** – Mr Kidney said one of his frequent recommendations is 'being clear on the decisions that you are trying to get made'.

'You have to understand the ecosystem, draw up exactly what you want to happen and push for that methodically. In the case of climate change, the first decision we are pushing for is Australian participation in a carbon-trading scheme. A second decision is a review of every portfolio in the government, with an aggressive climate change agenda in mind.'

**Incentive** – Incentives include financial perks such as rebates when you buy water tanks and green energy. For businesses and governments, there is an added incentive in good publicity. Lend Lease's green building in Sydney, 30 The Bond, received world-wide media plaudits when it opened, boosting the company's green credentials and image.

**Legislation and regulation** – Some examples of recent sustainability led legislation have been enforceable water restrictions and green building laws such as BASIX, the New South Wales Government's Building Sustainability Index, which sets energy and water reduction targets to ensure homes use less potable water and emit lower amounts of greenhouse gases. Other regulating factors include legally binding emission control targets, legal carbon trading schemes and planning legislation to set minimum amounts of new public transport, open space and green buildings, and to limit car parking spaces in new buildings. As one environmentalist put it, 'All regulation needs education as the velvet around the glove, but you still need that hard legislative fist inside the glove to make people change'.

**Branding/association** – Society can be changed by celebrities or popular media sending positive 'green' messages, supported by gimmicks, events and other communication devices which influence the public. Three good examples are Sir Bob Geldof's famous *LiveAid* charity, Bono's *Make Poverty History* movement and Bill Gates' worldwide vaccination program.

Here in Australia, sport has become involved, with the Australian Football League's *AFL Green* program<sup>5</sup> neutralising an estimated 120 000 tonnes of greenhouse emissions over the next three years. The AFL says that by 2009 its greenhouse emissions will be offset by investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency efforts, making it carbon neutral – equal to taking 25 000 cars off the road or planting 500 000 trees.

**Market forces** – Some believe that this is the only mechanism that can be relied on to force social change. A perfect example happened recently in Sydney. When higher petrol prices rose, City Rail reported a big surge in passenger numbers. Now the oil price has retreated, so have the commuters, back to their cars. As environmental commentator Gregg Easterbrook noted in the *Australian Financial Review*, 'Today no

5 See 'AFL goes carbon neutral', *Ecos* 132, p. 5.

one can make money by reducing greenhouse gases, so emissions rise unchecked. But a system of tradable greenhouse permits, similar to those for acid rain, would create a profit incentive. Engineers and entrepreneurs would turn to the problem.<sup>6</sup>

### Social entrepreneurs

One of the most significant elements of today's social change movements is their source. The social change writer David Bornstein, author of *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*,<sup>7</sup> told *Ecos* that 'most innovation in social change with a view to sustainability is not coming from governments as it might have done in the past. It is coming from individual social entrepreneurs'.

'Almost every single one comes from the citizen sector. They either lead the change processes or build on the strengths of existing ones. Governments tend not to be the leaders anymore but the very slow followers,' he said.

Examples abound. Some are facilitated by vast sums of money. In June this year the charitable foundation set up by the world's richest man, Bill Gates, received a staggering US\$37 billion (A\$49.7 billion) donation from investor Warren Buffet.

The main aims of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are to reduce poverty and improve health and access to education. Mr Gates has been quoted as saying: 'There is no reason why we can't cure the top 20 diseases.' The foundation is undoubtedly a phenomenally powerful force and has the chance to make significant shifts in social behaviour.

Other social entrepreneurs have had to rely purely on their wits, drive and determination rather than billions of dollars. As a result of the energy and vision of Jim Grant, UNICEF's former executive director, worldwide immunisation increased dramatically, prompting measles deaths and polio cases to fall. After his death in 1995, as a tribute to his work the US finally signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Fazle Abed created the development group BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities) in 1971 as a small-scale relief effort to help Bangladeshi war refugees, rebuilding thousands of homes and making fishing boats. Now it is one of the largest non-government development



The lives of 'unbankable' people in places like India and Bangladesh are being improved through the initiatives of social entrepreneurs rather than governments. Self Employed Women's Association (India)

organisations in the world, responsible for having boosted immunisation in Bangladesh from two per cent to 70 per cent. More than 53 500 community health volunteers and almost 3500 BRAC-trained health workers now deliver door-to-door health care services to the rural poor.

Economics professor Mohammed Yunus is seen as another saviour of the rural poor and is credited with developing the concept of microfinance. He established Grameen Bank (GB) in 1983 after trialling micro-loans for several years. For this significant effort, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on October 13 this year. GB blended capitalism with social responsibility and created a banking system based on mutual trust, accountability and community participation. For the first time, millions of un-bankable people had an economic voice. As of May 2006, it has 6.61 million borrowers.

Ela Bhatt founded the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India in 1972, which is now one of the most highly respected labour cooperatives in the world, and has its own microfinance bank open to all poor women to help them become financially independent.

But possibly the most important social entrepreneur, from the sustainable development point of view, is Fabio Rosa, a Brazilian agronomist revolutionising renewable electricity in his country's rural

regions. Fabio Rosa founded a for-profit corporation, Agroelectric System of Appropriate Technology (STA), and a non-profit organisation, the Institute for Development of Natural Energy and Sustainability (IDEAAS).

IDEAAS creates and demonstrates models of self-sustainable development for low-income rural populations by focusing on the use of high-efficiency and low-cost technologies in the fields of renewable energy and agricultural science. STA has been one of the leading companies in Brazil spreading the use of solar energy and managed grazing systems.

Rosa is aiming to distribute solar energy systems to more than 150 000 people in the state of Rio Grande do Sul who are isolated from the electric power networks.

These are all excellent examples of how programs have been developed and implemented to improve the health and wellbeing of millions of people. They prove how simple mechanisms can drive society to adopt more sustainable practices. Encouraging social drivers and developing new mechanisms for change should enable us to move closer to a sustainable future.

#### More information:

Institute for Development of Natural Energy and Sustainability (Brazil): [www.ideaas.org.br/index\\_eng.htm](http://www.ideaas.org.br/index_eng.htm)

Self Employed Women's Association (India): [www.sewa.org](http://www.sewa.org)

Grameen Bank: [www.grameenfoundation.org](http://www.grameenfoundation.org)

6 Easterbrook G (2006). Global warming: finally feeling the heat. *Australian Financial Review*, 22 September.

7 Bornstein D (2004). *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*. Oxford University Press, USA.