

My comments on Michael Spence Sustainability Mindset

David V. J. Bell

Hi Mike – thanks for sending this along. It is beautifully written, and succinctly lands some very important points.

Your emphasis on education and values is spot on – though I agree that they are necessary but not sufficient underpinnings of sustainability. I used precisely the same formulation in the conclusion to my book chapter (see p. 21ff.) entitled [“Education for Sustainable Development: Cure or Placebo?”](#). Ultimately we require a global “culture of sustainability” in order to provide the foundation for sustainability-based wise choices, decisions and policies in the economy, political system, and society generally.

I am reminded of the scenario exercise conducted a number of years ago by the World Business Council on Sustainable Development. (WBCSD) They outlined three main scenarios, each of which was premised on the increasing environmental toll of economic activity.

The first scenario (“FROG”) led to environmental disaster. Business As Usual continued under the banner “Forever Recognize Our Growth”. The *double entendre* of the title referred to the idea that a frog placed in lukewarm water that is gradually heated to the boiling point will fail to “pick up the signals” and instead of jumping out of the pot, will eventually die. By analogy, the global environment in this scenario deteriorates beyond critical thresholds because governments, businesses, and society in general fail to “pick up the signals” in time to avert tragedy. (Cf. the last sentence of your piece!).

In the second scenario, GEO, the signals are picked up in time and draconian action is taken under the aegis of a Global Environmental Organization that is given sufficient authority and power to regulate and legislate the world’s businesses, governments and individuals to behave more sustainably. Disaster is averted.

The third scenario was much preferred. Entitled JAZZ, it entailed a transformation of behaviour achieved through the influence of education and value change rather than through the power and authority of an all powerful global regulatory body. (I’m using these terms as defined in my book [Power, Influence and Authority: An Essay in Political Linguistics](#).) Jazz in this case is not an acronym but a metaphor. Jazz musicians are able to co-create music spontaneously and collaboratively by improvising on a structure outlined in a shared “chart” that shows the melody and chord changes. By analogy, in the JAZZ scenario businesses, governments and citizens/consumers/householders would all be “on the same page” because they would all understand sustainability imperatives and would share the values needed to coordinate actions to achieve

sustainable outcomes. Pretty far fetched to be sure, but an intriguing idea. What strikes me as useful in this scenario is the notion that a culture shift toward sustainability would make it a lot easier for both businesses and governments to adopt appropriate policies and decisions.

Another key point you raise is the challenge of developing a more sustainable alternative to the growth model. Basically I think we have somehow to effect a transition from 20th century capitalism to 21st century sustainable enterprise. But what does this entail? I'm sure you are correct that this transition will require plenty of invention and innovation (or what I referred to in an earlier comment as "sustainability ingenuity".) As you pointed out in your comments back to me, lots of the requisite ingenuity appears to be going on. But how much more is needed? How can we hasten it along? And what will a sustainable economy look like?

I think we have a fair idea of the "design specs" for a sustainable economy. At minimum I think a sustainable economy must:

- Create sustainable livelihoods for (most of) the world's 1 billion unemployed
- Provide products and services that meet basic needs (food, shelter, water, energy) for a population of over 7 billion rapidly growing toward 9 billion
- Drastically reduce waste (According to Paul Hawken et al.'s book Natural Capitalism, 99% of everything produced in the USA is in the waste stream within 6 months!!)
- Reduce throughputs of energy and materials by factor of 10 (or more likely a factor of 20)
- Operate on a low carbon basis that will allow us to reduce GHG's approx 80% by 2050
- Reduce environmental impacts and contribute to environmental conservation/restoration
- Reduce transportation impacts (for workers, inputs, and products)
- Encourage sustainable consumption
- Ensure that all companies and businesses are socially and environmentally responsible

- Achieve “smart” effective regulation.

For me the most hopeful point you make in *The Sustainability Mindset* is about the growing attention to sustainability in Asia and throughout the developing world. No doubt you are doing what you can to encourage this.

Thanks again Mike!

David