

Earth at the crossroads

Phoebe Barnard

Phoebe is co-founder and chief executive officer of the Stable Planet Alliance (<https://www.stableplanetalliance.org>) and affiliate full professor of biodiversity conservation and environmental futures at the University of Washington.

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Our species, despite its cleverness, is proving grimly resistant to wisdom. The rise and fall of civilizations over millennia give us much to learn from. Do we learn? Will we learn?

We should see the eight-billion-people milestone in 2022 for what it is: a red flag for humanity. Our appetites, and our numbers, underlie virtually every societal and planetary pressure and crisis we face. So we need short, medium and long-term strategies to turn our trajectory around, to keep humanity and our exquisitely diverse, beleaguered planet from the brink. As a medium-term strategy, this milestone should trigger a global grand-challenge moonshot focus: a multi-pronged process of tapering off our numbers and our appetites to a point where humanity can live in balance with ecosystems and with itself.

But how do we get from here to there? My personal reflection on many years in environmental and development planning, in two African nations at historical crossroads, suggests that as those nations did, we can and must hold explicit, open, honest society-wide dialogues – both formal and informal – on the purpose and values of a new economy, society and politics.

Namibia and South Africa

As a young scientist and policy strategist, I was privileged to be embraced by two countries, Namibia and South Africa, where I lived and worked for 34 years in government and academia. Without realizing it, I had found two nations which might teach the rest of humanity about negotiating major crossroads. Those two countries were at pivotal points in their histories. They could ask two crucial questions: “What kind of a society do we want to be from here? And how should we get there?”

When I was a young lecturer on biodiversity in Namibia at Independence in 1990, the capital, Windhoek, was a dusty town of fewer than 200,000 people. These were heady times: a young society emerging from often bitter colonial rule by Germany, Britain and apartheid South Africa, with the thrill of freedom. What kind of society could it now become – and how?

The mad rush of embassies to newly independent Namibia soon saw the sprouting of incongruously lush ambassadorial gardens. Where would this water come from? The driest nation south of the Sahara, Namibia has no internal perennial rivers. Under pressure from some of us, Namibia began managing water demand – not just supply – in line with its new, sustainability-focused Constitution. Previously, officials had simply found water to meet demand – whatever the costs. And wanting to grow a large and vibrant economy, the founding President initially urged his people to multiply rapidly – until strongly advised that the arid country and its economy simply couldn't support rapid population growth.

All this made me start to realize the acute risks which not only population pressure, but also highly unequal consumption, posed for our planet, biodiversity, climate and civilization. When I was asked to design and lead national programmes for Namibia, to give effect to the new Constitution which protected biodiversity, essential ecological processes and sustainable use, I had to think deeply about many things. One was how carrots and sticks, programs and policies might be artfully deployed to protect the hyper-arid country from degradation and overshoot. Namibia's periodic national visioning workshops – society-wide discussions and strategic planning sessions – gave power and oxygen to the detailed planning for the new country. We achieved a great deal there, in several respects becoming a model for other nations.

Later, at its own crossroads of post-apartheid democratic transition, South Africa too could wipe its national slate reasonably clean. It embarked upon its own visioning workshops, asking its own version of “what kind of society do we want from here, and how do we get there?” Crucially, it also created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to work the poison of racism out of its collective bloodstream.

I was asked to help lead global and national processes there, to assist South Africa and the world to understand the vulnerability of biodiversity to global change – especially climate change. South Africa's vigorous public-works programs, like Working for Water (Martin, 2018), remove invasive alien species and restore watersheds, whilst also providing large-scale employment and social services to help right the ecological, economic and social wrongs of its past. The country struggles to free itself from the suspicions and inequities of apartheid, but at its transition to democracy it rightly staked its future on a combination of sustainability, innovation, justice, restitution and ecosystem restoration.

Systems and leadership to repair overshoot

Our species is one of awkward contrasts, though. We humans are much too clever, and not nearly wise enough. Planning is one thing; effective implementation is quite another. With tribal and patriarchal histories, in Africa and all over the globe, we tend to exalt or vilify billionaires, divisive politicians, soccer stars and celebrities, rather than celebrate the unseen heroes of our society. We unwittingly glorify vanity and abysmal leadership, even when it destroys the fabric of our society and planet, or when it foments autocracy.

All of which has made me wonder, since those early working days in Namibia:

Is democracy – which despite good beginnings, now encourages superficial popularity rather than wise leadership – nimble enough, fast enough, strong enough, to bring Earth and humanity through the challenges of planetary overshoot and inequity ahead?

And is capitalism – which rewards competition, status, wastefulness, convenience and comfort – even remotely transformable to face down these same challenges and lead to an ecological civilization?

The global economy isn't a racing car that we can pull over into a pit-stop to repair. We must figure out how to transform it, radically, on the road. Likewise, unless we wish for chaotic revolution, we must focus on democratic or other profound, peaceable evolution of our social and political systems, mores, mind-sets and values. Many may argue that a century or so of multilateral progress shows us the frameworks for this. Many more may argue that 200,000 years of hominid evolution will overwhelm our flash-in-the-pan global collective experiments.

Long involved in the careers of young professionals globally, especially women in Africa, I started wondering about the nature of 'masculine' and 'feminine' values in leadership. Men (and others with assertive, competitive approaches to leadership) statistically tend to value status, competitive prowess, ego and powerful reactivity more highly than women. Women often – although certainly not always – tend to value collective benefits, long-term stability and a proactive pre-emption of conflict.

Do these statistical observations – stereotypes really – offer any guidance for the era ahead? I decided they certainly do, but that instead of promoting purely women's leadership, we might better promote more 'feminine' collaborative leadership among everybody.

Leadership is of course sorely needed right now, as Earth and our societies alike visibly fail to cope with eight billion humans. Many traits and values battle for control of our impulses, especially as our climate, planet and societies become destabilized. Will we reactively choose autocratic leaders, or proactively choose collaborative visionaries? Of course, it's better to be collectively conscious about it.

We brought some control over our darker impulses after WWI and WWII. We made progress in the multilateral collaboration that gave rise to the League of Nations, then the United Nations. It's nonetheless been short-lived: genocides continued in Cambodia, Armenia, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia. Political, economic and social repression have continued, with forced assimilation, 're-education,' and death of indigenous societies, Tibetans and Uighurs, among others. Our dire impact on biodiversity and Earth systems has accelerated since that time. We can't take our eye off the need for intentionality.

Way out of whack, and needing re-balancing

As a young UN biodiversity and climate negotiator on behalf of Namibia, I watched at close quarters the policy supremacy, quite detached from ecological or physical reality, of the World Trade Organization and how it dominated the impact of our environmental and social conventions. Raw materials were shipped from countries of origin (often tropical Africa and Asia, benefiting multinationals) to countries of value addition (often Europe, Asia and North America) and back again. Milk from cows in Britain is used to make cheese in France or New Zealand and shipped back again. None of this vast explosion of shipping and trade was possible without fossil fuels, and it only makes sense within a narrow and perverted framework of arcane trade laws and profit motives. Trade is ancient. But this cheap, ephemeral fossil energy causes waste in trade, and the transformation of habitats for cheap commodities, on an obscene scale.

I realized I was watching the peak and decline, in slow motion, of multilateralism and globalization.

The eight billion mark for humanity is no cause for celebration. It's a warning flag. As Bajaj (2022) points out, while we tiptoe around talking about population and consumption, our planet is being smothered, exhausted, and unravelled by it.

Yes, of course, humans are remarkable. Sure, we can be creative and innovative – and must continue to be. But that's not even remotely sufficient logic to wave away the incalculable travesty of stretched societies, overburdened infrastructure, declining social services, sorely abraded mental health, gun violence, biodiversity destruction, species extinctions, ecosystem degradation, greenhouse gas emissions and plastics pollution – among the many other crises, all direct or indirect symptoms of overshoot – that result. This is no longer 1950, when the western world still lived in a delusion of progress without consequence. And with a profiteering economy, we've only exacerbated all these trends through wasteful globalization.

It's our choice

Is an ecological civilization something that we can still actively choose? Or will our future be chosen for us, with passive disintegration and collapse?

The times ahead call on us to be the best people that we can be. And yet, chances are that many of us won't be the best. Increasingly, many are the worst – reacting impulsively, petulantly, violently. We've rarely been schooled to look ahead and plan for 'genuine progress' with the wellbeing of people and planet alike. Our responses are likely to be local and patchy. Some experiments in a wiser, humbler, more ecocentric humanity, wellbeing economy and horizontal democracy or benign non-collective leadership will likely succeed. Many other regions may prove unable to wrest our collective reactivity into a more intentional state. The jury is still out. And it may be out for some time.

Learn from the past about possible futures

History shows us that even quite modest climate change is accompanied by social, political and economic instability (Keys, 2000), as well as the outbreak

of pandemics. But most of us didn't anticipate the additional curve balls of autocracy, which often weaponizes gullibility. Autocracy, it's become unpleasantly clear, is the more common outcome of long-term strategies for global domination by strongmen and ideologues throughout the world – from Putin to Bannon and what Monbiot (2022) calls the 'turbocapitalists' of the world. It's brought out the very worst of humanity, at the worst possible time – what von Hellermann (2022) calls the tragedy of the non-commons.

I'm not the first to observe these impulses. But it seems as though our cravings and reactions, our tendency to human supremacy, xenophobia and finger-pointing, rather than our tendency for trust, collaboration and ecological inclusiveness, could make us go down with both a bang and a whimper. Does it need to be that way? If we fail to act on our six, seven, eight billion human milestones, we'll be letting nature impose a cull rather than actively engaging self-restraint.

Concerted and public collective effort is now needed to rope in these darker tendencies. Our eight billion milestone reminds us that we have left the times of predictability and stability. The unstable future is whizzing up to hit us.

Radical transformation – in many dimensions, and all at once

Perhaps because of the magnitude of the challenges, we compartmentalize and isolate them. We see crises of climate, biodiversity loss, plastics pollution, political and economic instability and so on, as unrelated. But they're all symptoms of overshoot. And that should be enormously reassuring, because it offers us a coherent, rather simpler set of solutions.

Stabilizing and reducing our numbers and our appetites – and reframing our cultural, economic and personal values (Fioramonti *et al.*, 2022) – can defuse most of our societal and planetary crises within this century. Of course, these are medium-term strategies. The shorter-term work to stabilize our climate, planet and civilization still requires at least four things: radical cuts in emissions, removal of atmospheric methane and other greenhouse gases, moratoria on land transformation and logging of mature forests, and acceleration of economic transitions to support all these steps.

If we can commit to these, we have a chance at restoring both our planet and our climate. That's the subject of a film I'm co-producing with John Bowey and Pat McDonnell this winter.

So in the next year, globally, we need to prepare ourselves very much better for the g-forces of environmental and social change. But also, we need to consciously reopen ourselves to the possibility of success. The world doesn't have to be this way. And it doesn't have to end this way. We can choose survival – based on wisdom rather than reactivity; intentional community actions rather than fortress resource-grabs; resilience and transformation rather than collapse.

We can, and must, embrace the opportunity to redesign almost everything that's wrong with our society and planet. Learning deeply from wiser and more ancient communities, the western world needs to cultivate the ability to protect the Earth we share, and all her beings, while reining in impatience, self-interest, spite, xenophobia and fear.

We can, to some extent, rewrite our species and societies, as if from a blank slate. These times will call on us to be the very best people that we can be. Let's not waste a good crisis.

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