

Can we save the world? Part three.

Tormod V. Burkey is the author of *Ethics for a Full World*.

I need help writing a book. An edited book, entitled “Can we save the world?”, outlining all the disparate mechanisms that makes it hard for us to solve environmental problems involving international dimensions and tipping points. (See [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), or my book, [Ethics for a Full World](#) (notably the chapter “Why are we not acting to save the world?” and the Afterword).)

Some seem concerned that the title implies a dismal outlook, that it expresses negativity that the world needs to be saved, and that we are not doing anything.

Well, if you don’t believe the world needs to be saved, this effort can be treated as a hypothetical. Assuming that the world needed to be saved, could we? You don’t have to buy the premiss to address the range of challenges we would face, or to describe the mechanisms we would have to deal with if we were to face an existential crisis. Whether that existential crisis were for ourselves as a species, for modern human society, or for other species...

Nor is this an invitation to fatalism or despondency if we had to answer in the negative, but a challenge to think hard, and deeply, about the systems and institutions we would need in order to come up with a more heartening answer.

Some might think it is not our place to save the world. This is not a view that we need to spend much time on either.

Some might ask, what is new with this effort?

There must have been lots of brainstorming sessions and strategy sessions for individual efforts, and presumably every project has one, or several. Most ongoing efforts look at ways to solve the problem or problems. They try to do what they can do. This is more of a meta-approach.

This doesn’t try to save the world, it

merely asks, “could we?” Or, it tries to save the world by explicitly studying the factors and mechanisms that make such an undertaking difficult, and compiling it all in a single volume. Hopefully this might be a resource for anyone in a position to try to make a difference.

This is not a book for the masses, nor a process for the general public. If I knew what the answer was I could write the book myself. Besides, the book would be much more authoritative and useful if it were produced by international experts in each field that touches upon these challenges. It would be produced after a real workshop or seminar series where the authors would discuss across disciplines, correct and supplement each other, learn from each other, and come up with new ideas. On this question, nobody knows the answer. And nobody can speak convincingly on all the fields and disciplines that come into play. We would also include experts that have real experience in the world of trying to make things happen and with efforts in the international arena.

Previous efforts have tended to look at what measures need to be instigated to reach certain goals. For instance, Project Drawdown has gone to great effort to quantify and rank the sources of climate emissions and rank “solutions” that are needed to reach climate goals. But, as per usual, it says nothing about what would be needed in order to go about making such changes actually happen. In my mind, it is not a solution unless it is actually carried out. And we need to figure out how to get humanity to actually do these things in time. Such a road map needs to be part of any solution.

Demonstrating that it is still theoretically feasible to reach the 1.5 degree target, or the 2 degree target, is a valuable contribution. Knowing what would be necessary and sufficient would be key to any solution. At least if we were to try and reach such solutions through guided and coordinated efforts. And one could see how it would be tempting to leave unto others the business of figuring out how to actually go about doing it. It is of course also possible that trying to figure out how to get the

job done would founder on too many hypotheticals. It may that we would always be doomed to make the kinds of statements: "If we can get enough politicians to do x, then...", "If we can get enough countries to enact y, then...", "If we can get people to support z, then..." The real question is always: *how* do we get people to do x, y and z? No analysis is complete before this core conundrum is resolved.

Real solutions have to be modeled to demonstrate that they will be adequate, and to uncover any weaknesses and limitations and allow for modifications. We will have to practice adaptive management in any case. But can we ever really know what is necessary and sufficient? If we can't figure this out, would we be better off taking a multi-pronged, distributed and uncoordinated trial-and-error approach? Or are we relegated to putting our faith in technofixes? What if there are some problems that are amenable to technofixes and others that are not? Are there classes of problems we can fix, and classes of problems that we can't? If so, what are the critical characteristics defining this dichotomy? Would we be correct in focussing on process rather than outcome? In any case, do we know what we need to know in order to design good processes? Necessary and sufficient processes?

It may be that a disorganized and multi-pronged, haphazard, approach might work, but in any case, that is something that we should think through concertedly. Is there a rational way to proceed? If so, what distinguishes good ways from bad ways? What would happen if we put some serious thought and effort into designing a good process?

We should know by now that it was a mistake to assume, as many scientists and organizations seem to have been doing, that once the facts were known and people just *understood*, then humanity would act. We can argue about the extent to which enough people truly understand, or what that would take, but I would be more comfortable if we really thought it through. And made the knowledge we

acquired thereby more widely and easily available.

How much effort has gone into thinking through the structure and process of international efforts like the climate and biodiversity negotiations? Or even less complex matters such as the exploitation of marine “resources”? How much of it has just been inherited from similar undertakings in the past? To what extent have participants studied lessons from past processes, and the mechanisms one needs to know about and understand in order to make good international agreements? How would we design such processes if we really wanted to be successful? How would we design institutions that we wanted to be successful at dealing with processes that involve tipping points and international dimensions?

This effort would also take on the interaction of different existential threats, like biodiversity meltdown and climate breakdown, not merely look at particular problems in isolation. It would face up to the challenges of tipping points, and how our systems are not accustomed to dealing with problems where there is a huge struggle against the clock and where it may become too late, with dealing with irreversible change.

There is no shortage of people, or organizations, that will tell you we have to do this or we have to do that. But are all these things really necessary, or together would they be sufficient? They tell us we have to have x, and we have to have y. But how do they know, and do we really? And anyway, the big question is, as always, *how* do we get humanity to do those things that are necessary and sufficient? As part of gaining some traction on this conundrum, I propose we look in a structured manner at the obstacles to action, and the mechanisms that make it difficult for us to actually “save the world” when we need to. Creating a resource for those who seek to solve such complicated problems might be useful in helping us design initiatives that might actually help.

One challenge may be that it is perhaps too large a topic to take on in a single

volume. Books have been written on the weaknesses of our democracies, the lack of power to get things done, on international negotiations, on social movements, and on cognitive failures that affect us all. I don't think, however, that they have been explicitly focused on solving the kinds of problems we are facing today.

To me, most books on environmental issues miss the point. Or, they never get to the point. The whole book is typically dedicated to describing how bad things are, and imparting basic knowledge. Again the assumption that if we only knew, or truly understood, we would do something about it. How we could do something about it is, at best, left to a hand-waving argument in the last few pages of the final chapter. How we could get to this point, where we actually *could* take action, or what that would take, is never asked. You could read an infinite number of such books, and still come out of it without any operational knowledge on how to go about actually doing something. In part, this is an assessment of humanity, our various strata and subdivisions and their relationship to each other, and of our institutions.

Some keywords are complex systems, international treaties, economic systems, tipping points, dynamic systems theory, democracy problems, behavioral dynamics, communication and social organizing, institution building, risk management, international law, ecology, power structures, game theory, planning, dealing with uncertainty, and the cognitive failures and biases that affect us all.

A tall order, perhaps. It might help to start with a themed article collection, or an invitation to a special issue of a journal. Though I suspect that it would have to be tightly curated due to the broadness of the topic and the many specialized themes it involves. For instance, it seems that many of Pallgrave Communications' topics for article collections could each have been a chapter in the kind of book I envision. And such collections could of course be important resources for the authors of such a book. It must be possible for others to learn something, without

delving through such a towering mass of journal articles on so many fields. A collection of experts at the forefronts of their respective fields might be able to compile something useful out of their combined knowledge (of such collections) and their interaction.

Like the seminar series or workshops I envision in order to write the book I have in mind, such an effort would seem to still require 25-30 experts (at least) in different fields working in collaboration to put it all together.

But one of the challenges is that everyone may be too tied up with prior engagements and deliverables, and too busy to participate in any new initiative that comes along. This may in itself be a key challenge to overcome if we are to save the world.

Personally, I struggle with even the organizing of the writing of such a book, let alone saving the world... If, on the other hand, such a book has already been produced, please let me know because I should like to read it.