

Who's gonna solve these problems?

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Posted to <http://thorshammer.blogspot.com> July 30, 2014.

Climate crisis, biodiversity crisis, population crisis, fisheries crises, extinction crisis: over-harvesting, over-population, over-exploitation, over-fishing and illegal fishing, bottom-trawling and shark finning, forest destruction, ocean acidification, habitat loss, invasive species, the problems of an economic system that requires perpetual growth on a finite planet... Who is going to solve these world-threatening problems?

Politicians are not going to solve them. They wouldn't know how. They don't have the knowledge, expertise or intelligence to solve them. They don't have the right education and often very little of it. These days, politicians in most countries have no experience of anything other than being a politician. The system nowadays seems to favor politicians that are no better than the general populace. Besides, politicians are at odds with each other. Their "solutions" have to fit their ideology and their political agendas, and appeal to their constituents. Politicians don't fit solutions to problems, they fit problems to the "solutions" they already have. And politicians are beholden to their corporate overlords, who only answer to a group of shareholders watching their bottom line, and to the voters (who are a diverse group of fickle, ill-informed, and none too bright people with commonly short-term selfish interests and limited understanding, that are easily confused and divided). Even when politicians (and their voters) mean well, their positions are marred by naïveté, fuzzy thinking, stale ideology and wishful thinking, as well as the pressure to say something, anything at all, and to be seen to be doing something, however useless. Besides, they are busy running to the next sound bite opportunity. Politicians who run too

far ahead of their constituents end up being punished by the voters, or their donors.

Civil servants will not solve it.

Bureaucratic fragmentation has made their jobs too narrowly defined for them to make any headway on complex and broad problems that require a multi-disciplinary approach to solutions. Civil servants are not selected on the basis of their ability to solve complex, interactive, cross-sectoral problems.

Academics are not going to solve

them. Scientists are trained to describe the world, not design practical ways for doing things differently. They are busy teaching and doing research. They are measured on their publication rate. Publications have to be short and narrowly focussed. They are descriptive rather than prescriptive. Scientists cling to their “objectivity” and shrink from the noisiness, nastiness and silliness of the “political process”. Scientists commonly have very little training in communicating with a wider audience. Academics and technologists may provide ideas and technical breakthroughs that will be part of the solution, but they will not be the solutions themselves.

Conferences and seminars leave way too little time to get real work done, or to make the participants generally more knowledgeable. Typically, nearly all of the available time is spent on one-way communication, and on getting everyone on the same page, leaving no time to think ahead, solve problems and be creative. The focus, sadly, tends to be on spreading information, rather than assuming that everyone has come prepared, have the information they need, and have something useful to contribute. And sadly, the assumption that people do come ill-prepared often proves justified. When it is time for participants to participate, it is usually a two-way Q&A session, rather than a broad discussion, and many of the people that do speak out seem more interested in the attention than in actually contributing something useful. But mostly, these kinds of events are way too limited in time and scope. Large international meetings, like the various UN Conferences of the Parties

(COP) will not solve issues, because the nations attending have such different agendas that any consensus they manage to reach will be so weak and watered down as to be useless—or worse.

NGOs will not solve it. They are busy doing whatever they can get funding for. Their efforts tend to be focused around “projects” because that is how funding is commonly structured. Projects are typically the wrong scale, both spatially and temporally, to get anything serious done. Anyway, demonstrating the success of such projects becomes their focus, and is what they are measured on, not finding complete solutions to major issues. This even creates a disincentive to be truthful about how effective their campaigns really are. I see campaigns by WWF (and others) to stop ivory poaching and the like. They make me think, “Excuse me, but WWF is a large organization and it has been around for a long time... Why haven’t you solved this issue a long time ago? And if you haven’t solved it during all these years, why should I think that you will solve it now?” NGOs have little incentive to ask the hard questions of themselves, or of society as a whole.

Citizens tend not to revolt unless their own economic future is directly affected or their own personal liberties are threatened. Even when they do revolt and bring changes, what they get is quite often worse than what they had. The general public are woefully unprepared for their civic duties, preoccupied and stressed out, overstretched with families, mortgages, jobs... Jobs filled with busy-work, almost as if they were designed to ensure that the people filling them would not contribute to finding solutions to major issues. And folks are still waiting around for politicians (or bureaucrats) to solve things—after all, isn’t that what we pay them for? This, of course, is a recipe for disaster.

People are not trained problem-solvers. Our schools do not teach problem solving. It is quite possible to train people to become good problem-solvers. But we don’t. Why is that?

To make headway with such complex issues it seems to make sense to make a dedicated effort to come up with and analyze practical solutions. Small teams of dedicated, smart people could be hand-picked to deal exclusively with a single issue, for a specified period of time—for instance two years—after which they should submit their recommendations. Teams would be constructed to provide the necessary combinations of knowledge, intelligence, experience, creativity and specific skill sets—not only in the academic sense, but in terms of knowledge and experience of how the world actually works, currently (or *doesn't* work, as the case may be): both broad and specific knowledge and understanding, access to information and networks, definitive problem-solving skills, analysis and modeling skills, overview and the ability to work in teams as well as independently. Such (a) team(s) should be housed at (a) politically independent think tank(s), that could be called something like “The Solutions Center(s)”. The teams should have access to anyone who could help shed light on, or analyze, sub-components of the analysis (specific knowledge, modeling capacity, analyses, brain-storming). They should be isolated enough to give their complete attention to the work at hand, yet have sufficient resources in terms of access to information, communications, people, modeling resources and computing power, institutions and support teams/assistance from associated personnel with specific skill sets, as needed. At times they would be able to invite others to provide specific information or inputs, participate in seminars and brain-storming sessions, assist with particular tools or provide any knowledge or experiences not adequately covered within the team itself.

The recommendations of such teams/ think tanks would not necessarily be taken up automatically by national or international institutions such as governments. However, **their recommendations would be out there for all to see.** They would be available for public scrutiny. They would be very hard to ignore, as they would state explicitly what approaches will not

work, or will be inadequate in isolation, and they would be backed by the most comprehensive thinking and analyses of the issue available. At the very least, governments and other institutions would be pressured on whether or not they had any ideas better than the ones proposed by the think tank(s), why they were not implementing the recommendations if there were no better ideas out there, and what, if anything, was being done. Simply documenting a feasible approach to such important issues would be powerful. Moreover, if feasible solutions were not found that could be implemented in our current system, this would provide a powerful impetus to analyzing what kind of structures and institutions (systems) would have to be created in order for practical and realizable solutions to exist. More powerful still, would be the demonstration that none of the measures currently on the table or being discussed are up to the task. This might help clear away the endless bickering about minutiae and the political posturing over half-measures and inane diversions from the real issues. For the public it would be a useful counterpoint to what they are hearing from the politicians and bureaucrats.

If someone wished to dispute the findings of such a team, they would have to conduct their own analysis and make it available for scrutiny. At the very least, the discourse would shift to comparing competing comprehensive analyses, their inputs, methods and limitations, rather than what we have now, which is simply a confusion of more or less half-baked and unsupported opinions. Such **opinions are typically thrown out there with very limited analysis**, and certainly without a thorough modeling of whether or not the steps suggested are necessary or sufficient. And they tend to be colored by ideology and careerism more than a real desire to solve the real problems.

An alternative, and perhaps a complimentary effort, might be to crowd-source thinking about these matters. This could be enabled by internet technology and collaborative software, such as wikis and groupware.

Personally, I think this ought to be a complimentary, and preferably parallel, approach. The key requirement is to be able to allocate more focus, time, brain power, tools, creativity, critical thinking, and hard-nosed analysis to the issues than anyone has been able to do before.

Largely, we know what needs to be done, but have no idea how to get humanity to do it. Nobody knows how to get people to act when we need people to act. It is no use pretending. Our political systems are rigged so that no major changes will occur. This is OK as long as things can generally bumble along as they always have, but it is a disaster in a crisis situation when you really need to get something done, and something major. Typically, when nations really needed to get something done, as in the case of major wars, they have tended to suspend democracy and instate executive rule. Coming up with solutions does not just require good ideas about things that can be done, but has to include how to get them implemented. **It is not a solution unless it is carried out—and in time!** In a sense, such teams would likely operate, partially, as all of the categories above: as politicians, civil servants, academics/scientists, citizens, activists, conferences/workshops, and NGOs.

Typically, potential solutions will be conditional. “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. Even then, implementation has to be subject to adaptive management. Solutions will have to be smart, in the sense that they incentivize countries and other actors to join in, rather than remain on the outside, disrupting. This kind of analysis is all too rare in our society, and absent from current discourse. Something major has to change, and no stone should be left

untuned in order to solve the hard problems that are threatening life on earth.

(A more limited proposal along these lines can be found here: <https://mahb.stanford.edu/post-author/tormod-v-burkey/>)