

2012

CONCLUSION

GREENER

NEWWAY

JOB, SKILLS, AND EQUITY IN A CLEANER U.S. ECONOMY

A REPORT BY

SARAH WHITE

WITH LAURA DRESSER AND JOEL ROGERS

COWS · BUILDING THE HIGH ROAD

THE TASK BEFORE US

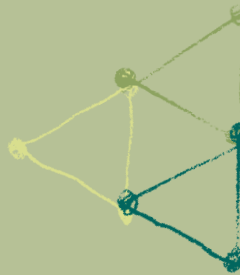
Whatever their own structure and rules, human capital systems always interact with a broader economic and social context. We've indicated some of the context in the preceding report. Along with climate change and growing resource scarcities, in the U.S. this includes widespread denial of these problems or resistance to doing much about them; a political system deeply corrupted by organized money; and little countervailing power from an informed and organized democratic public.

This context is often threatening to even the most admirable and accomplished efforts described in the preceding pages. At best, it tends to keep them small or marginal. At worst, it simply overwhelms them, washing them away without a trace.

Things are not a great deal better internationally. The world has made little concerted progress on sustainability since the first Rio summit. Globally, we see deep-seated cross-national tensions of all kinds and as much devolution as progress in the development of international regulatory institutions. In many areas, certainly including the environment, there is little leadership in the production of global public goods.

Of course, such context is not immutable. It can be changed by policy and politics. But even thinking about that sometimes seems a fool's errand. There are so many things that need to be done, and so much justified doubt that many of them will be done, that the task may seem pointless — either the detailed writing of programs with no chance of enactment, or the statement of first principles, but with a monitor turned firmly away from earth.

Our own view is, we hope not stupidly, somewhat more optimistic. We think of this as about the best as well as worst of times, and that humanity still has the power to choose a decent future for itself. Whether it will or not is the famous \$64K question. But it's not as if those wanting a choice for sustainability and resilience don't have anything to work with. We, meaning humanity, are richer than ever before, with cross national inequality substantially receding, even as within-country inequality has increased. We're also more educated than ever before, with better science and engineering than we've ever had, and almost infinitely more connected to and aware of each other's existence. And we're collectively probably more alert to the fact that greater cooperation among humanity is needed for our survival than at any time in our long history. In dealing with threats like climate or zoonose pandemics, or opportunities like broadly shared



VALUE NATURE

LEAD WITH
EQUALITY
AND RESPECT

BUILD DEMOCRACY,
DON'T ASSUME IT

Several billion years of design experience is not something to discard lightly.

prosperity via sustainable development, interdependence means we cannot escape each other even if we want to. We need to act together. Nor is this last insight privileged to elites, or incapable of moving people to action. Every day, in a blessed unrest, millions of people are moving to bend their practices toward greater sustainability and a more cooperative relation to each other and with nature. And most of humanity is on its way to cities, where such cooperation, and gains from it, is both an imperative and visible. So we have a natural platform for scaling the work that needs to be done, rooted in the everyday life of most people.

What seems most essential, in policy and politics, especially but not only in the U.S., to improving the possibilities for this work? Here are three things that strike us as key.

The elements in this trio are not abstract first principles; they derive from fact. But equally, while each has clear policy implications, they do not comprise a blueprint for positive action.* Think of them as elements of program architecture: legs on the stool or platform on which such policy and politics is possible. Each of these elements strains against our present context and if fully built would break it. But work on each and all can also, to some degree, begin anywhere and immediately. Most important, contemplating that work, is to see their joint necessity and connection.

Value nature. We are not nature worshippers. We don't think of nature as kindly, or innocent, or even primordial. So long as humans have been around, we've worked and shaped it, taming its independent forces to our ends. In some measure, we will and should continue to do so. This said, several billion years of design experience is not something to discard lightly, and it's clearly idiotic that we're pushing well beyond the limits of the physical system that enabled human life on this planet. If we care about human life and would like to continue it, we might want to learn a bit more from nature about how we organize our own productive activities, and respect those limits. And if we continue to organize our economic affairs largely through competitive markets of different kinds, one way to begin to stop that is by putting some price on what nature gives us, and on what we're doing to it by way of destruction or restoration. That means assigning, through regulation and markets, limits and costs to such things as carbon dioxide and other GHG emissions and minimal requirements and rewards for our natural capital's more efficient and restorative use. We stress that actual regulation, public power and decision, are needed here as well as markets. Markets of course can and should be used for the allocative efficiency they're pretty good at. But no market "invisible hand" should be relied upon to

* For readers wanting one, we recommend the 2012 report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability, *Resilient People Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing* (available at www.un.org/gsp/report/).

magically guide self-interest toward the preservation of the global natural commons, much less the restoration of those parts of use to us. For that we need the heavy hand of public authority to set market limits, or take some things of public concern away from them entirely.

Lead with equity and respect. In the end, as we all know, all people are about the same. We all want at least some respect, and we all want a chance to do something with our lives. Large numbers of people, within this country and across the world, commonly don't get either. That's not a good thing. It may well be a possible thing, especially in the near term. The same science and engineering that give tools for sustainability give unprecedented means of surveillance and repression. Anxious private and public elites may manage to extract enough resources from the general population to keep a good portion of it in misery. But it's certainly not a good thing, and in the end is likely to frustrate any environmental aspirations. The reason is that the willing cooperation of many people, and nations, will be needed to achieve anything like resolution of our environmental problems. That cooperation will not be forthcoming if you don't treat people with respect. Temporizing admitted, there are only two endgames of threatened environmental disaster. It arrives. Or it's turned back, via greater mutual respect among the members of humanity. And respect means opportunity, which requires greater equity.

Build democracy, don't assume it. If the world is really threatened by anything now, it's not hordes of poor people overrunning elites, but a few elites destroying what's left of real democracy. With Freedom House and others, we observe the fall of dictators and the spread of formal democratic institutions. But we also see the effective hollowing out of democratic sovereignty, as nation states are gradually converted to collection agents for banks, and a decline in the forms of popular organization that once gave "the people" some real bite in the economy and politics. Such organization is urgently needed now. Yes for reasons of equity, but also for competence and

There are only two endgames of threatened environmental disaster. It arrives. Or it's turned back, via greater mutual respect among the members of humanity.

capacity, for the sake of a productive, not just redistributive, democracy. Without the organization of masses of actual people, in the economy, with a stake in the sustainability of its practices and the local intelligence and monitoring capacity to sweat the details and make those practices work, they simply won't. We know this from countless failed efforts at top-down planning or command and control regulation by government, but even more from efforts to change private institutions or public bureaucracies without the involvement of people in them. But such productive organization of people in the economy will not arrive naturally from the present organization. The big labor/big corporation/big government deals of the postwar Keynesian synthesis are largely behind us now. Firm boundaries are more permeable and elastic; variation in linkages among firms and the relevance of workforce heterogeneity are both greater. So it needs to be aimed at, deliberately supported as a matter of politics, to be achieved. The U.S. case is a limiting one, since employees don't even have the rights of association such support premises, which suggest a natural starting point for reform. But it should just be one of a series of starting points (key others are in the content of education and rules of political competition), because the real end is an informed and contributing democratic public, capable of deliberative action in both the economy and society.

In the transition to a truly resilient and sustainable economy and society, such valuing of nature, showing respect and widening opportunity, and building a productive democracy all go together. You won't get the first, or be able to manage it, without the second, and won't get the second without the third. Sustainability, equity, and democracy can't be easily separated.

For providers of education and training, taking all three seriously has implications for practice. There are of course the new occupations in the more productive or restorative use of our natural capital to prepare for. But there are also the many and myriad ways that compensation could be better tied to skill, and skill made more accessible to all. There are the many uses to which employee organizations in the economy can make the delivery of skill more efficient and credible with employers, in a positive upward reinforcing cycle of human capital demand, rewarded acquisition, productivity improvement, higher demand, etc. There is also need to revisit and revise the "civics" education now largely abandoned in our schools, considering, for children and adults, the basic public purpose of our education system. This is not to produce drones, or stratify inequality, or first distinguish, then narrow, then render vapid, the teaching of practical as well as cognitive capabilities needed by all, but to produce the cosmopolitan survivalists and productive citizens essential to the flourishing and progress, and perhaps survival, of our neighborhoods, nations, and world.

There is work for others too.

If the world is really threatened by anything now, it's not hordes of poor people overrunning elites, but a few elites destroying what's left of real democracy.
