

How do we progress towards a good human-centred sustainable society?

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This conference has rightly drawn our attention to the critically important question of where the current trends in the world are taking us. There is, however, a basic ambiguity in what appear to be the big picture directions. Towards a confusing world out of control? Or moving step by step towards a just, human centred sustainable world? We are in an extremely perplexing phase of human history.

The eminent economist Jeffrey Sachs has summed up our current situation in the following way.

In our confusing, confused, and distracted world, we are running powerfully off course in many ways – climate change, the sixth great extinction, cities in danger, food supplies under threat, massive dislocations, widening inequalities of income, high youth unemployment, broken politics.
(Sachs, 2015:505)

I will put to you that we are at the crossroads between a dying world order and the emergence of a new order. This is a transition marked by conflict, tensions, and a sense of confusion.

For example,

- Between globalisation and the revival of economic nationalism and geopolitics, particularly in the Asian region;
- Between the largely uncontrolled progress of science and technology in such areas as artificial intelligence and automation and our concerns for jobs to underpin the kind of society we have known;
- Between societies that are ever more individualistic in many countries, and our concerns for the withering of social bonds that hold people together in communities, and which support collective action for the common good – a world coming apart.

So does the future lie with a rerun of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and disaster, or is there, perhaps less discernible a trajectory towards a good sustainable world.

A current test of directions that confronts us is how we respond to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030.

The goals are directed at the big issues confronting us in building a better world- ending poverty, eradicating epidemic diseases, ensuring food security, providing quality education for all, and so on. Goals all very relevant to Africa. In their totality they provide a set of good ideas, with an underpinning of ethics, such as the idea of ending poverty, that could provide a framework for a better world.

Each of the goals is a worthwhile aspiration and deserves our support.

I am, however, particularly interested in the statement by the United Nations that the goals are "integrated and indivisible" (United Nations, 2015) linked to the concept that the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social, environmental- should be addressed in a balanced and integrated way.

PASCAL has been interested in the idea of holistic, integrated development for some years under a program we named EcCoWell in our work on learning cities. EcCoWell communities and cities address balanced holistic development across economic, ecological, community, well-being, and lifelong learning objectives.

The city of Cork has taken the lead on EcCoWell development with a website that provides information on their EcCoWell initiatives. I will return to the EcCoWell concept later in my remarks.

If our target is balanced holistic development across the key dimensions of sustainability, how well are cities around the world doing?

A useful guide is provided by an international study undertaken by the Arcadis organisation that applied a Sustainable Cities Index to 100 cities (Arcadis, 2015). This gave the following overall ranking in 2016 across the three dimensions of sustainability.

While the dominance of European cities stands out for reasons that bear reflection, I am particularly interested in the performance of Singapore at second place in the rankings. The Singapore story is a good success story of a small island city state that invested in the future.

It is a story from a colonial past, a failed amalgamation with Malaysia, then the development of as a successful development model that it has exported to other countries. The Centre for Liveable Cities, established by the Singapore Government, has played a role in this success.

The point I want to make is that when we think in terms of balanced sustainable development, we may get different results than relying only on the traditional economic indicators. The report of the Arcadis study had the sub-heading “Putting people at the heart of sustainability”. This should be our guiding principle.

For example, if we look at some indicators showing progress in ending extreme poverty, we see that China has made very commendable progress reflecting the rapid industrial development of China, and the impact of urbanisation with the movement of large numbers of people from rural poverty to city jobs. However, these indicators do not tell the whole story as I will assert when I comment on the question of happiness.

If we wish to get a more balanced picture of our progress towards a just sustainable world we need, I suggest, to probe the social dimension of sustainable development a little further, including addressing the question of happiness and well-being.

I raised the question of happiness last year at the PASCAL Glasgow conference drawing on some insights from the field of positive psychology, including the crucial distinction between pleasures and gratifications.

- *Pleasures are the bodily pleasures that come through the senses and are momentary in time;*
- *Gratifications on the other hand engage us fully so that we are immersed and absorbed in them. They give meaning to our lives.* (Seligman, 2002:102-121).

In building good sustainable communities we need activities that provide gratifications in our communities. Much voluntary activity can do this and give meaning to peoples' lives.

The emergence of the UN 2030 Agenda has highlighted the question of providing good measures of progress that go beyond the traditional economic indicators, and which cover social dimensions of sustainability as well as economic. This has led to considerable interest in measuring changes in levels of happiness and well-being in our communities.

In response to this need, the *World Happiness Report* has been produced every year since 2012, initially prepared for the United Nations High Level Meeting on Happiness. The latest 2017 report includes special chapters on Africa and China which are worth a careful reading.

This initiative has gone along with a growing recognition that happiness should be seen as “the proper measure of social progress and the goal of social policy” (World Happiness Report, 2017: 3). OECD has joined this trend and in June 2016 committed itself “to redefine the growth narrative to put people’s well-being at the centre of government’s efforts” (OECD, 2016).

So we need to see happiness as both personal and social, a fundamental objective of development, and have appropriate policies.

The World Happiness Report 2017 showed an interesting cluster of countries as the best performers in the happiness of their people.

The outstanding feature for me is that five of the ten best performers are the Scandinavian countries: Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Sweden – with Australia, Canada, and New Zealand then also in the top group.

So what is this interesting finding showing?

The 2017 World Happiness Report observed that there are six variables that dig into different aspects of life that influence these happiness assessments.

These are GDP per capita, healthy years of life expectancy, social support, trust, perceived freedom to make life decisions, and generosity. The research team concluded that the top ten countries ranked highly on all six of these factors (World Happiness Report, 2017:3).

In addition to these variables, the 2017 study found that the top countries ranked highly on the main factors found to support happiness – caring, freedom, generosity, honesty, health, income, and good governance (World Happiness Report, 2017:1).

I have long been an admirer of the Scandinavian countries, and from my visits over the years I have found them to be cohesive communities with a shared sense of heritage, fairly egalitarian countries, and with a strong commitment to lifelong learning. OECD studies of adult education and lifelong learning over the years have consistently shown these countries as the best performers.

So what are the implications of all this for Africa, for the role of universities, and for our ideas on connecting urban and rural areas in sustainable development?

Before giving my views on these matters, I will take up the related question of why learning cities have never been sustained in Africa. How can we find better approaches that work in Africa, and which are relevant to both urban and rural areas?

I had a shot at this question back in 2012 in a paper with Professor Abel Ishumi in which we argued that strategies had to be culturally appropriate for African contexts (Kearns & Ishumi 2012).

The next year, Professor Idowa Biao from the University of Botswana was commissioned to address this question for a special issue of the *UNESCO International Review of Education*. Professor Biao went back to some ideas from the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and argued that initiatives had to be based on conscientisation.

Conscientisation is “the process of developing critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action” (Biao, 2013:476).

I agree with Professor Biao that this is a need in building sustainable learning communities in Africa that serve both urban and rural areas. The conscientisation of city dwellers and of urban-rural linkages, for example.

The importance of conscientisation in building good sustainable communities takes us to the related idea of mindful societies which have been described by Jeffrey Sachs in his very interesting book *The Price of Civilisation in the following terms.*

We need a mindful society in which we once again take seriously our own well being, our relations with others, and the operation of our politics. (Sachs, 2012:162)

While I believe that each of these views can contribute something of value in building good societies, I have now come to the conclusion that we need to respond to the needs of urban and rural areas together in an integrated way. That is, we need to think about learning regions that link urban and rural areas that than simply learning cities. I appreciate that this brings further complexity in terms of governance, finance, and other aspects, but I now believe that this perspective is necessary.

This brings me to the role of universities in the context of sustainable development objectives and the challenges and opportunities of the digital era.

While I have no doubt that the role of universities in this era of sustainable development will change if we are to truly achieve a just global sustainable society, I would like to start by taking up the important role of universities in fostering and supporting lifelong learning opportunities for all, a key foundation for progressing the UN 2030 Agenda and building a better world.

The role of universities in fostering lifelong learning was the subject of an interesting paper by Francoise de Viron and Pat Davies based on the experience of European universities. In this paper they make a distinction between university lifelong learning and lifelong learning universities. The former will be familiar to you as continuing education while the latter conveys

a more comprehensive implementation of lifelong learning (de Viron & Davies, 2015:41-42).

They envisage progress towards the broader objective as involving three development stages: an adoption stage, organizational stage, and a cultural stage when lifelong learning is fixed within the DNA of the university.

The authors concluded that few European universities were yet at the cultural stage.

While I don't know African universities to make a judgment on your situation, I wonder if the situation is any different to that of European universities.

If we are looking for a major expansion of lifelong learning opportunities for all across Africa, as a key response to the UN 2030 Agenda and African development needs, is there any other way to harness the university contribution?

To look at what I think is a good option for Africa, I will go back to China to the city of Beijing.

The Beijing Learning City has been developed at three levels: the city, administrative district, (with 16 districts) and neighbourhood. The Beijing Normal University is intimately involved in policy and research for the initiative as a partner with Beijing City Council.

City	Beijing City Council, Beijing Normal University, Beijing Academy of Educational Science
District	Adult Education Colleges, Community Colleges
Neighbourhood	Community centres

This is a partnership model that connects the role of the lead university to the Beijing City Council in policy development and research, with lifelong learning provision then delivered at the district and neighbourhood by colleges and

centres. In this way, lifelong learning opportunities are provided for large numbers of people in a partnership arrangement directed at on-going improvement.

Beijing Normal University worked closely with the Beijing City Council in the development of the Beijing Five Year Plan for the period 2016 to 2020.

Beijing Learning City Action Plan 2016-2020
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Construction of exemplar learning districts2. Exemplar lifelong learning bases3. Digital platform for lifelong learning4. Academic credit bank5. Building learning organisations6. Enhancing innovative workers7. Training the new professional farmer8. Education for the elderly

A major survey on adult competencies for lifelong learning in Beijing, undertaken by the Beijing Institute for the Learning Society in 2015, further illustrates the key university research role in building a learning city (Beijing Institute for the Learning Society, 2012). The Institute was created jointly by Beijing Normal University and Beijing City Council.

While the university role is central in the Beijing Learning City, so too are the roles of each of the partners in this initiative, including community colleges.

The community college role is even more important in the Taipei Learning City. This is a different type of community college that does not award credentials but has two objectives fundamental to building a sustainable democratic society. A community college was established in each of the twelve administrative districts of Taipei with two objectives:

1. To provide lifelong learning opportunities for all; and
2. To promote citizenship and community.

The second objective of community building and citizenship is taken seriously by Taipei community colleges and has led to some creative initiatives in local neighbourhoods. The experience of very large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Taipei in drilling learning city initiatives down to local neighbourhoods was a key lesson from the PASCAL PIE program experience, and led to me developing the idea of learning neighbourhoods which was tested in pilot projects involving Taipei and Cork.

The two cities shared their ideas in a workshop in Glasgow last year following the PASCAL International Conference. The creative ideas shown in these projects demonstrated what can be achieved when local communities are motivated and empowered. Three community projects that illustrate the potential were the Songshan Happy Garden, Bihu Weaving House, and the Shilin Community Wetland Restoration.

So the partnership of universities, councils and community colleges can be creative and powerful. Empowering local neighbourhoods to take initiatives towards a good future for the community is a critical step towards a just human-centred future.

Could this kind of partnership involving universities, councils, community colleges, and other partners including business, be adopted in South Africa?

Well, a good example already exists in the splendid Elgin Foundation and Community College in the Oberberg district of Western Cape.

This is a rural area where this initiative taken by the PASCAL Centre in the University of Johannesburg, led by the director of the Centre Professor Marius Venter, has been directed at changing the lives of farm workers and their families, as well as the many migrant workers who work on farms during the harvesting season.

The Elgin Community College offers a range of courses in key areas of community and rural development to give expression to the PASCAL EcCoWell philosophy of balanced holistic development.

The Elgin initiative has been innovative in harnessing the tools of the digital era in exciting new formats for training using technology such as smart phones, E-Tablets and web-based E-learning.

There are great opportunities to widen access to learning throughout life in such ways, but there are also needs to be met.

This slide shows the great expansion in the use of smart phones in Africa, but also the disconnect with the use of the internet.

Other countries, such as mine, face the same problem, particularly for older people, requiring new approaches and partnership. An interesting initiative in Australia illustrates the potential. This program, titled Tech Savvy Seniors was directed at meeting the needs of older Australians for internet skills through a partnership led by Australia's main Telco, Telstra, working with the State Library in three states, with the State Library then bringing in large numbers of local council libraries as delivery sites for the program. This digital age needs partnerships like this, as well as creative ideas, in widening learning opportunities for all.

The Elgin example points to the need to find low cost ways to bring lifelong learning opportunities to large numbers of people in ways that suit African contexts. Another good example is provided by the Tanzania's Folk Development Colleges that were established in 1975, at based on the model of Swedish Folk Schools, the express wish of President Julius Nyerere. The Tanzania colleges were supported by Sweden for 21 years until 1996 when they continued with local leadership in an important local community role that combines lifelong learning, training, and community building roles.

A further interesting precedent exists in Africa in the Millennium Villages project with villages in ten countries across Sub-Saharan Africa innovating in developing ways to implement the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. This led to some good innovations in such areas as low cost health provision in the villages.

My plea then, is for partnerships between universities, councils, business, civil society and other institutions such as community colleges in strategic, holistic development (like the Beijing example I have given) that reaches down to local neighbourhoods, and which bridges urban and rural areas. Our response to the UN Sustainable Development Goals will be a good test of the future we desire.

While building sustainable local communities is fundamental, this needs to go along with global consciousness and competence and a concern for the future of Planet Earth. It is interesting that OECD recently decided to add “global competence’ to the PISA study on school performance recognising that schools should teach young people to “support the development of peaceful diverse communities’. Universities, no less than schools should contribute to the great project of building a good human-centred sustainable society

If significant local development along the lines of the Elgin initiative is part of the human face of a good sustainable future, what of the confusing and disconcerting global trends that were my starting point?

I want, in particular, to go back to the emerging world of automation and artificial intelligence, that is seen by many as threatening jobs and the basic underpinnings of the kind of society we have known.

Certainly, the emerging world of augmented intelligence and intelligent robots deserves our careful attention in foreshadowing a further revolution in the human condition. The historian Yuval Harari identified three great revolutions in his *Brief History of Humankind* (Harari, 2015). In his *Brief History of the Future*, appropriately named *Homo Deus*, Harari then took up the emerging world of “post-humanist technologies” - a world dominated by machines (Harari, 2016). So are we moving to a fourth revolution in the human story that started when homo sapiens left Africa? What can we do in the face of these trends?

This is where an historical framing of our situation has value. The previous Industrial Revolution which started in Britain in the 19th century transformed a rural agricultural society into a world of chaotic industrial towns and cities with appalling living and working conditions for most people. This was a world out of control with technology and the market running ahead of the capacity of people and their governments keep pace and build a good society. While the industrial revolution and its democratic companion eventually brought significant benefits to large numbers of people, the process of change left governments and their communities confused and trailing behind change.

So there is a case to prepare for the coming revolution in the human condition so that we can respond to whatever challenges we face and manage the

transition more effectively than happened with the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century. In doing this, we need to think imaginatively about the past and future.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest six developments that I see as particularly relevant to South Africa in preparing for the future, and perhaps to Africa more generally.

These are:

- Actively foster lifelong learning for all;
- Build partnerships along the lines I have suggested;
- Strengthen and empower communities and citizenship;
- Do all we can to progress the UN Sustainable Development Goals;
- Extend digital literacy for all;
- Build a mindful learning culture in communities.

But how do we bring these objectives into action programs such as Learning Cities?

I will suggest two options and welcome your comments on these, either now or after the conference.

The first emerged from the recent UNESCO Learning Cities conference held in Cork, the conference endorsed three key themes for Learning City development. These themes were:

1. Green and health learning cities;
2. Equitable and inclusive learning cities;
3. Decent work and entrepreneurship in learning cities.

These are all worthy objectives that will add much to learning city development. The challenge is how do we connect these objectives in integrated holistic action. What are the connectors between these objectives?

For my second option, I am going back to the EcCoWell initiative that I mentioned. The EcCoWell core of environment, health (wellbeing) and learning has much in common with the UNESCO first thematic area. This also provides a very good entry point into implementing the UN SDGs in an evolutionary approach over time as linkages are forged with other SDGs.

However, you will also see from the PowerPoint that EcCoWell2 brings in the concept of building a mindful learning culture as a key driver of this development. In suggesting this, I am going back to the view of Professor Biao, and the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire with views on transformative learning that have been carried forward by Jack Mezirow and others. The ways in which transformative learning strategies can be used to build mindful learning cultures in communities is a question that I hope will be examined in PASCAL EcCoWell2 development over the next couple of years.

A core feature of the approach I am suggesting is that we need to build a sense of meaning and purpose into people's lives to enhance their happiness and wellbeing and the values of the communities in which they live.

The psychologist, Emily Smith, has argued that there are four pillars that build a sense of meaning and purpose into our lives, these are:

belonging, purpose, storytelling and transcendence. (Smith, 2017: 41)

I particularly like the inclusion of storytelling which reflects the importance of storytelling in many cultures throughout history, from the ancient Greeks and Celts to Australian Aborigines and many of the cultures of Africa and first nations. The transcendence pillar reminds us of the need to go beyond our local concerns to foster such attitudes as global consciousness and empathy, and a sense of our common humanity and destiny. This is a further challenge for educators and community leaders.

So my plea is for partnership, particularly non-traditional partnerships, with collaboration at all levels in building the moral, institutional and cultural foundations for a good future to confront whatever the future may hold. Universities can have an important role in this great and necessary adventure.

As the world we know gets ever closer to the fourth great revolution in the human condition, widespread conscientisation in mindful learning communities will be a fundamental prop for a managed transition driven by human values and needs. Mindful learning communities are resilient communities able to adapt to change and support each other.

The next PASCAL International Conference in Seoul in the Republic of Korea on 30-31 August next year will, I expect, address a subject *along the lines of*

progressing from learning cities to a universal learning society – a society embracing people everywhere in urban or rural communities. This could be seen as a staging post to take your ideas back for international discussion and responses, and I hope that there will be a strong African participation at the conference to share your ideas and build from the experience of others.

I would like to conclude with some words of a great African educator, Julius Nyerere, the former Prime Minister and President of Tanzania – an ardent advocate of education and lifelong learning all his life.

Man can only liberate himself or develop himself. He cannot be liberated or developed by another. For Man makes himself. It is his ability to act deliberately, for a self-determined purpose which distinguishes him from the other animals. The expansion of his own consciousness, and therefore of his power over himself, is environment, and his society, must therefore ultimately be what we mean by development.

So development is for Man, by Man, and of Man. The same is true of education. Its purpose is the liberation of Man from the restraints and limitations of ignorance and dependency. Education has to increase men's physical and mental freedom to increase their control over themselves, their own lives, the environment in which they live. The ideas imparted by education, or released in the mind through education, should therefore be liberating ideas; the skills acquired by education should be liberating skills.

(Nyerere, 1978:27-28)

Which way to turn? Of course, to a sustainable human-centred future for all humankind.

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