SDGs and the Future: Going beyond our ideas

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Meeting Report

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The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 are visions adopted by all countries in 2015. Agenda 2030 is “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom.”

Yet, what the world will look like in 2030 is fundamentally unknown. How to implement Agenda 2030 and meet the 169 targets is also uncertain, despite commitments and the shaping of plans. There is a need, therefore, to enhance our aptitude towards a future-oriented perspective to explore options and master uncertainty. It is also instructive to view the SDGs not so much as a means to an end (for example, eliminating poverty) but instead as an end to a means (fundamentally changing current models which will ultimately end poverty). We need to ask how profound and fundamental these global changes will need to be.

Global Future is a non-profit Geneva-based NGO. Global Future promotes futures-oriented dialogue and scenarios on critical and urgent topics for long-term sustainability. Global Future supports institutions to build views to master uncertain structures, systems, decisions and policies for a better future.

Global Future is starting a movement where a future perspective is integrated into the thinking around the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the global action to reach the SDGs by 2030. The movement is intended as a starting point for a series of future-oriented dialogues and processes to explore critical questions and emerging challenges that may inspire the implementation of Agenda 2030 in a changing world.

“How can we look into the future to find the changes we need?”
Global Future has convened four speakers and involved participants from academia, the UN, NGOs, Governments and the private sector in surfacing overarching issues that drive the present into the future. The panel of speakers have been chosen for their innovative thinking and drastically different perspectives. We named them the Implementer, the Disruptor, the Thinker and the Technomic.
The Implementer sees the right environment of the future as one conducive to solutions for the current issues, where innovations arise from specific needs. However, there are challenges: we don’t know where to look for effective and globally implementable innovations and solutions; and global innovation systems must be shared more. And a key question remains: how do we make innovation accessible to all, including the vulnerable and marginalised that are traditionally excluded from many advances?

The Disruptor sees the need for “devolution”: where Homo Sapiens returns to its “hunter-gatherer” origins; where there are several small societies inside the society; where a minimum income is guaranteed and time is dedicated to socially worthwhile activities. Robots and machines will take on most of the productive tasks, freeing up people’s time for more cultural tasks, thinking, reading, poetry, or well-being, for example. There will be a singularity, a revolution of intelligence or even enhanced intelligence, radically changing the direction of our paths so far, breaking the evolutionary trajectory. Humans will be able to change and adapt to this new paradigm.

“Religion will be more about ethics.”

The Thinker sees the development of humankind on an inevitable path rocketing towards sure destruction unless we change. Indeed “we have already fallen off the cliff” and live unsustainably:

“We consume 70bn animals per year.”

The Thinker recognises that hypothetically we have all the tools, all the knowledge, all the potential to discover innovative solutions, but they are not completely in place yet. Science can bring solutions but it is not free; it is led by funding, political decisions, economic prioritisation and development. “Science can save us if it is free to do so and if globally accepted ethical frameworks are developed.” Ethical frameworks should include future consequences of the experimental approach more widely. Science should not cause suffering or create devastating weapons, but needs to consider the future application of discoveries and the risks of unintended consequence in the wider environment.
How have we arrived here? Where are we now?

Our history and evolution, as Homo sapiens, has much inbuilt momentum – from expansion of our brains to expansion of our empires, to the detriment of all that is around us. “Humans are the most deadly creature on the planet – we need to understand our deadly nature.”

Through our struggles and beliefs we have become used to the notion of work as central to gaining status, ensuring meaning and accessing food. History is peppered with life-altering technological strides, such as the invention of fire and four industrial revolutions, and their use to promote our quest for “more”, with some of the attendant and urgent problems of inequality. Such innovations have also delivered better medicines, longer lives and wider access, in other words, development.

Today we live in a world of opposites: systems that are no longer sustainable or conscionable on the one hand (54 billion chickens are consumed annually, for example), and, on the other, insufficient advance for some of the most pressing problems: health, educational and energy, for example. Innovation is expected to deliver the solutions to our problems.

It is widely believed that business as usual cannot be the way of the future. Most agree that “partnerships” risk merely extending current trends by tinkering on the edges. What to do?

“We have to close the gap between what we do and who we are: closing the gap between ideals and action.”
Energy to power our brains goes from 8 to 20%, muscles weaken, we develop fire, storytelling and myths.

Since the 1st industrial revolution our population grows from 0.5bn to 5bn.

We collaborate, become agriculturalists and settle.

We built ships and empires, wipe out other species.

We need to let go of screen addiction and go back to myth making, storytelling and new narratives.

We now consume 54bn chickens, 1bn cattle, 1bn pigs.

WE HAVE ALREADY FALLEN OFF THE CLIFF
THE THREE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TO ACHIEVE THE SDGS

THE ENVIRONMENT

GLOBAL VS LOCAL

CHANGING MINDSET
A conducive environment, the right conditions

The right environment is not the same for all of us: individual sectors must evaluate exactly what is the right environment for them and what are the consequences of their cross-sectoral work. Current human myths (money, values and stories) appear to prevent humans from changing. The incentives for what we do and the functional evolution of who we are have led to the current system of activity and reward, supply and demand. Continuing this trend may simply further aggravate existing challenges. On the other hand, opportunity exists today to change this trajectory and shape our environment with a different purpose in mind. One thing has emerged clearly: such a change will not come easily and the change itself may be a “singularity” that causes a global shift – much like the invention of fire and previous industrial revolutions have.

A conducive environment is not yet known, future scenarios of idyllic environments are anyone’s guess, but what are the future plausible realities we might be faced with?

“If we stay where we are we will have a nice state of mind but will not change”

The missing link between the global and local perspective lead us to “tinker around the edges” without effective change

Global priorities agreed by countries will need to be implemented nationally and locally. A greater focus on local implementation ensures improved sustainability and possibly fewer negative global impacts; solutions of greater relevance; speedier proof of concept and elimination of innovations that don’t work. Hyper-local implementation is better able to address individual needs and priorities than massive regional or national initiatives. The local perspective is about an element of devolution and adaptation. Best served with a dose of social conscience. The local focus may become more appealing after a singularity that decouples the need to work from the ability to secure survival, thus promoting greater social contributions and inputs.
Experimenting with the changing mindset: moving from consumption/addiction to understanding the “grand puzzle” and adopting a “social ownership” mindset

The paradigm shift here is that we have an “old mindset”, which has led us to a consumption/addiction attitude where we interpret innovation for our own needs, where we are forced by externalities and external major events to change. But what is a more appropriate mindset? In order to change we first need to realise who we are and what exactly is the “old mindset”. We then have to create the right conditions under which we can change, and we have to make sure that we have an understanding of what we can or want to sacrifice for the gain. Can we transcend our evolutionary history and develop societies in which social goods are prioritised and rewarded?
We have to use our intelligence to imagine the future; machines cannot do this for current lack of imagination, frameworks are too restrictive and lack flexibility and adaptation to change.

Enormous cross-pollination between sectors, perspectives and knowledge was achieved during this event. The perspectives surfaced by the speakers and the public are innovative, exploratory and structural in nature: they assess what may be some of the necessary drivers to implement the SDGs. Some insights represent further developments of the current reality, and some are novel. Three pillars stand out which are critical to address and understand the coming decades:

1. **The Environment** must be conducive to achieving the SDGs: this is an essential precondition. There is limited value in incremental changes – which may secure only partial progress on the SDGs.

2. **Global versus Local.** Global goals can perhaps only have local solutions – this might even mean delinking from current systems of over-abundance and unsustainability and change the apparently inbuilt evolutionary momentum of who we are as a species.

3. **Changing Mindset** with a profound shift towards a more humane and socially oriented society, where a common myth has to be articulated collectively and where centuries-old mental models about the meaning of work, poverty and belonging are deconstructed.

These pillars as well as some critical questions represent important outcome of “SDGs – The Future” Event, which will be integrated in the ongoing work developed by Global Future.

Global Future proposes that greater resilience as well as long-term sustainability can be ensured by including the future perspective and the three main pillars illustrated in this document in planning, strategising, programming, monitoring and evaluation as well as general decision-making regarding the SDGs and the implementation of Agenda 2030.

**BIG QUESTIONS**

- **Can machines solve the global impasse of human destruction?**
- **Where is the focus of decision-making and knowledge-sharing?**
TEAM

Dr Patrick Noack CEO and co-founder Global Future
Dr Maddalena Campioni Chair of the Board and co-founder Global Future
Mr Joshua Knowles Scribe, Artist, Curator and Illustrator
Mr Chris Shaw Editor Global Future and Freelance Editor
Ms Emma Hunt Associate Global Future
Ms Justine Heckmann Associate Global Future
Dr Julia Gray Associate Global Future
Ms Nathalie Andre Associate Global Future

SPEAKERS

Dr Francesca Celletti Vice-President of Innovation and New Technologies Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation
Prof Henry Markram Professor of Neuroscience at the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology, founder of the Brain Mind Institute and the Human Brain Project, director and founder of the Blue Brain Project
Mr Nicholas Davis Head of Society and Innovation World Economic Forum
Dr Gabriel Pictet Societies, Communities, Health and Innovation International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent
Global Future

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