Thinking and Acting in a Disrupted World: Governance, Environment and People

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ABSTRACT

Political, economic, social and cultural regeneration is an essential condition for the regeneration of natural and built environments. Earth recovery and mankind recovery are complementary aspects and should be dealt with simultaneously, in space and time, for their mutual support. Environmental problems must be defined through an integrated ecosystem lens: nature restoration cannot be achieved without human restoration. New spaces for enlightened participation and discussion should be opened in the socio-cultural learning niches, both in the academia and in society in general. Grappling with the political, economic and cultural contexts will be a key factor to unlocking more of the potential impact of these efforts.

KEYWORDS

Education, Culture, Politics, Economics, Ethics, Environment, Ecosystems

The restoration of the Earth and the restoration of humanity are complementary aspects and must be dealt with simultaneously, in space and time, for their mutual support. Environmental problems must be defined through an integrated ecosystem lens: the natural world and the human world are two sides of the same coin.

Healthy ecosystems need a balance between all living things. The world is a web of many threads, all linked together. Diseases, catastrophic events, are driven by climate change, loss of biodiversity, wicked land use, unsustainable ways of production and consumption, contacts between wildlife, livestock and people.

An important factor contributing to land degradation is embedded in distorted "development", "growth" and "progress" policies that favor the intensive use of land to produce commodities for exportation, the extraction of irreplaceable native flora, the destruction of forests by logging, the pollution of soil and watersheds by mining.

Chemical stressors, such as plastics, pesticides, pharmaceuticals, and metals, are being increasingly widespread in ecosystems. Social, political and economic asymmetries between ordinary people and corporations have led to natural devastation, loss of biodiversity, poor housing, lack of sanitation, fatal epidemics, crime and violence.

Can efforts to protect people, animals, plants, soil, biodiversity and climate have a political, economic and cultural counterpart in responsible policies directed at effective control of deforestation, soil destruction, mining pollution, illegal wood extraction, agro toxicity of crops and ultra-processed foods?

Scientific studies related to environmental issues generated by scientists rarely reach the highest level of decisions unhindered, and when this happens, decision-makers tend to choose other paths to meet the interests of political and economic groups, disqualifying studies and reports that confront their misdemeanors.

Business and financial interests have a privileged status in public policy debates, in the news coverage, in the academic curricula, which run the risk of promoting “entrepreneurship” within the traditional system of things as a magic formula to solve the problems derived from the system itself.

It is not uncommon to see discrepancies between data collected by independent researchers and official reports. Do these reports express the real issues? Besides the legal framework and statutory rules, how do we deal with the issue of loyalty to corporate interests, which are rewarded to a large extent with favors and benefits?

The intrusion and hegemony of technological and technocratic solutions in all realms of life, actually obscures the need for a holistic, integrative and transformative ecosystem approach to the problems of our time. Would “artificial” intelligence be a magical path towards the demise of “natural” intelligence?

World economy, restricted to profit-making activities, does not change the asymmetric relationships between ordinary people and corporations; the concept of "progress", manipulated by the dominant political and economic groups, favors the expansion of megacities, where living conditions deteriorate more and more.
In our globalized world, while a small part of the population uses the entire planet as a stage to improve their political and economic status, the majority of the population lacks the essential conditions to prosper as human beings: health, education, security, spaces of coexistence, green areas and a balanced diet.

What interests are at risk, who are the actors involved, and what rules govern their behavior when they have to decide between public and private interests? How do we deal with the dominance of technological and technocratic solutions compared to an integrated ecosystem approach?

Concepts of “governance” do not take into account the design, formation, maintenance and failure of the institutions, the asymmetry of power between people and corporations, the economic and political alliances, the differential responsibility and uneven production of vulnerability.

In the public arena, “values” and “needs” are slanted to the advantage of the heralds of globalization, through advertising, celebrities, influencers and producers, the orchestrated messages of the mass media, which ignore the essential ethical and esthetical values and needs that give meaning to the existence.

Values, common heritage, traditions, community ties, are actively dismantled by the globalized world: studies have shown that in contemporary societies, values result mainly from the messages orchestrated by the mass media, by advertising, by the “show business”, by “celebrities”, by prestigious people.

Populations rooted in specific niches, indigenous peoples, face the power of the economic, political and technological system (the “productivity paradigm”), threatening their physical and cultural territories and survival: heritage, traditions, community ties, are actively dismantled by corporate interests.

An ecological civilization forms human beings, not consumers for the market-place; policies for “sustainability” cannot ignore fundamental aspects of Bildung, like cultural heritage and other essential components of the quality of life, such as landscapes, the arts, architecture, music, literature and humanities.

A global constituency of culture (Culture2030goal) calls for the recognition of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development and has urged public authorities to integrate culture into the global development agenda, in view of the social-ecological interdependence and its contribution to environmental values.

Communication, advocacy, thematic networks between professionals, specialists and policy-makers, demand a fundamental change in the treatment of problems related to culture, politics, economy and the environment, encompassing ethical responsibility, scientific accuracy and a comprehensive, transdisciplinary approach.

Instead of dealing with segmented, reduced issues and trying to solve isolated and localized problems, communication, advocacy, public policies, research and teaching programs should focus on the general phenomenon deep inside the “boiling pot”, where the problems are generated and should be dealt with (Fig. 1).

Capacity-building implies environmental, political, economic, social, cultural and ethical aspects: when an activity threatens human health or the environment, precautionary measures are mandatory, even when causes and effects are not fully established (an issue that is promptly explored by corporate interests).

All dimensions of being in the world (intimate, interactive, social and biophysical), should be considered in view of their complementarity and dynamic equilibrium, as they combine to elicit the events, deal with consequences and organize for change (deficits and assets, mutual support).

In the socio-cultural learning niches, subject-object relationships can be unveiled, subjective and objective realities can be entangled (intimate dimension), multiple visions can be shared (interactive dimension), different forms for being-in-the-world and its consequences can be analyzed (social and biophysical dimensions).

The heuristic-hermeneutic process includes a thematic (what), an epistemic (how) and a strategic (who, when, where) aspect, considering subjects, the thematic issues, the structure of thought embedded into subject-object relationships, and the construction of policies and actions in view of new forms of being in the world.

Instead of reduced, segmented issues, of traditional public policies, academic formats and mass media headlines, attention is focused on the general phenomena, in view of the design of comprehensive policies to tackle the phenomena deep inside the “boiling pot”, instead of dealing only with the bubbles of the surface (fig. 1).
Changing the paradigms of development, growth, power, wealth and freedom embedded into the political, technological, economic and educational institutions, implies the development of institutional capacity, judicial neutrality, public transparency and social spaces for civic engagement and enlightened political participation.

The regeneration of the Earth and the regeneration of people, groups and communities are complementary and must be dealt with simultaneously; problems and contexts in which they occur should be reinterpreted and restructured through an ecosystem lens, changing the ways of addressing them (fig. 2).

Instead of a narrative of mere survival, of public outrage, fear and save yourself who can, the issue encompasses the recovering and development of the qualities that has defined us as human beings throughout the history, such as creativeness, compassion, ethical and esthetical values.

The complexity of global challenges requires creative, comprehensive and long-term approaches, including anticipation (consequences), reflexivity (commitments), inclusion (involvement) and responses (capabilities); public participation, discussion and engagement should precede decisions in all areas.

What about the time horizons, pressures and priorities of spatial transformations? What about the clashes between the intrinsic effects of formal and informal institutions and elite agency as critical junctures leading to different outcomes on environmental problems and the state of the world?

In this sense, communication, advocacy, public policies, research and teaching programmes should:

1) define the problems in the core of the “boiling pot”, instead of reducing them to the bubbles of the surface (fragmented issues, reduced academic formats, segmented public policies);

2) consider, as donors and recipients, all dimensions being in the world (intimate, interactive, social and biophysical), assessing their deficits and assets, as they combine to elicit the events and organize to change;

3) promote the singularity (proper characteristics) and reciprocity (mutual support) of all dimensions, considering their complementarity and dynamic equilibrium.

The development of socio-cultural learning niches, empowering participants for problem-solving and qualitative constructs to trigger change, would be an important tool to deal with the cultural, political and economic context and unlock more of the potential efforts towards change.

Political, economic, social and cultural regeneration is an essential condition for the regeneration of natural and built environments, International treaties, states, should hold transnational corporations to account for human rights and environmental violations.

National and international entities, civil organizations, sciences representatives, “bio clusters”, an international network of sustainability leaders, scholars, academicians, students, youth movements, community groups, activists, policy-makers and practitioners should be involved in the process.

Figure 1 (left). The problems are generated deep inside the boiling pot (the general phenomenon); they are not in the bubbles of the surface (segmented issues, partial public policies, effects, consequences).

Figure 2 (right). Problems and contexts must be restructured through an ecosystem lens: "I'm done with this school thing, man. Almost no night classes. Dangerous, I'm scared of an assault. I don't want to stay home either."