

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission Template

ID number: 747

Summary:

Societal well-being can be improved by putting more time and energy into building community and developing organizational relationships across sectors, supply chains and nations. Overcoming the challenge of a food and energy crisis can be accomplished by focusing on transforming our societal systems (e.g. economic, social, education, healthcare, energy and food systems...etc) into ones that create an enabling environment for people to meet their fundamental needs while not simultaneously degrading the environment. We can learn from the microcosm of Cuba's food and energy crisis and how they worked together to manage it.

Essay:

What if tackling today's food and energy crisis can help us build platforms for longer term societal well-being? Human beings are an inherently social species and yet in seeking to improve our well-being we have undermined social and environmental systems to a point where the long term well-being of humanity itself is now threatened. We must avoid making the same mistake again by learning from our past, creating sustainable solutions through cross-sector collaboration and building of stronger a sense of community and belonging. Ultimately, we must re-examine whether the systems we have created to help us run our lives are truly helping us meet our fundamental human needs.

The challenge of transforming society requires a big-picture perspective and a variety of methods and tools to help people cooperate, collaborate and co-create at many levels. Bringing this combination of large- and small-scale cooperation into reality requires harnessing a new collective wisdom never before accessed on this scale throughout history – and *how* to do it is a major challenge in itself. If population rises by 50% and per capita consumption increases 4-6 times this century, we will need to provide services 6-9 times more efficiently just to maintain our present level of planetary degradation. To surpass this, we need systems thinking, a shared, principle-level vision of what we want to create, and a common purpose.

We all share fundamental needs as human beings. Outlining them explicitly helps to define what a societal system should enable in order to improve our well-being and quality of life. Manfred Max-Neef's proposal of 9 non-hierarchical fundamental needs including *identity, freedom, protection, participation, understanding, creativity, affection, idleness, and subsistence* is the theory I find most compelling. Each culture goes about satisfying these needs in different ways. Are our current food and energy systems (and others) creating barriers that prevent people from meeting their need for subsistence? Freedom? Understanding? Societal well-being is based on more than just food and shelter.

Using a combination of positive goals (what we want) and negative constraints (what we don't want) is a powerful way of articulating a shared principle-based vision to guide daily action. The current food and energy crisis is an example of our systematic deterioration of the quality of the atmosphere, topsoil, water reserves, and biodiversity

catching up with us. Since society and the environment are inextricably interlinked, it follows that systematically degrading the ecosphere in order to satisfy our needs will not increase our well-being in the long-run.

We need to identify the deeper patterns in our current system that are translating into effects in every sector. Problems cannot be solved individually – we need to address the design of society at the systemic level in order for local food and energy solutions to be effective. For example, if I decide to develop a plot of land just outside town such that I am able to grow enough food to satisfy myself and my family's need for subsistence – this does not mean that I am now safe from the food and energy crisis. As people in town face severe food shortages, it won't be long before some of them come out and raid my land to steal my food. The realizations that everything is interconnected has to sink in – by just helping ourselves individually, by doing everything right, we will still go down if we do not all come up together.

Those wanting to take a leadership role need to do more than just get their own houses in order. Businesses are experiencing this also – realizing we cannot make one business out of a whole supply chain sustainable. When one business stands up and wants to change their practices, instead of only working within their own operations, they have to pour efforts into engaging and working with others, or their own efforts will have limited outcomes. At first this can seem almost altruistic for a company – and indeed it is an entirely different way of thinking than the competitive focus we are trained in.

In rising to these challenges, we should also learn from global experience. Cuba's experience in dealing with an energy and thus food crisis brought on by trade embargos in the 1960s is invaluable. With the loss of access to oil, tractors couldn't run, fertilizers and pesticides could not be produced, and food could not be distributed. This microcosm demonstrates both the fragile dependence of our current industrial food system on oil, as well as the success of re-building food and energy systems based on local organic agriculture and sustainable, renewable energy.

To transform our current system, we have to work within both short-term and long-term constraints. Our actions now must bring a return that can fund future endeavors. While we must decouple our systems from fossil fuels for a variety of reasons (rising atmospheric CO₂ levels, social upheaval from issues of extraction and distribution, lack of resilience from dependency on one substance, dwindling supplies, etc.), this cannot be done overnight – it must be a step-by-step process. Fossil fuels have such a high usable energy content in comparison to most other possible energy sources that we should be using them more strategically to power the transition to a more sustainable energy capture and supply system (e.g. wind, solar, geothermal and hydro – all which require infrastructure).

In conclusion, the main leverage points for improving our well-being in the face of a food and energy crisis are to forge collaborative relationships across sectors and organizations at every level, and not underestimate the commitment and time this takes. We need to work together across supply chains, communities and governments to decouple our systems from oil, focus on local community organic agriculture and the construction of sustainable, renewable energy infrastructure. We can start by examining our current systems through the lens of long-term sustainability principles, a concrete definition of what well-being means based on our fundamental needs, and nurturing the seeds of new systems based on cooperation rather than competition.