






Chapter 15

Drawing the strings together

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1. Introduction

The chapters of our book were written as separate contributions to scholarship. However, there is an underlying unity – a broad picture. This chapter aims to highlight such unity without denying noticeable differences between the respective chapters. The book aligns with the aphorism with an interesting history: *Think globally, act locally* (Dubos, 1998 [1969]).¹⁷ It is, in fact, an extended case study of how a not-for-profit company can think globally and act locally.

2. Think globally

The global perspective is the theme in the first two chapters (PART ONE) called *Philosophical Considerations*. In Chapter 1, the reader is invited to focus on the concept of *development*

17 Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), a Scottish town planner, originally used the idea. His occupation is interesting as the book includes references to town planning in Chapters 9 and 11.

from a qualitative perspective encompassing the globe. Our view is directed towards planetary well-being through a new presentation of the *Sustainable Development Goals* of the United Nations as *Planetary Well-being Goals*. It is argued that there was an evolution in the understanding of the concept of human development in the last century, whereby the emergence of new insights leads to qualitative improvements, without abandoning the insights of previous phases. Therefore, *planetary well-being*, which includes human well-being and the well-being of living non-human beings within the integrated Earth system, is a more appropriate ultimate development goal in the time of the Anthropocene than sustainable development. Thus, in Chapter 1, development is interpreted as *transitioning to a qualitatively better state*. This is a more inclusive take on development than the traditional interpretation of the word, where development mostly refers to the development of low-income persons. Although all the book chapters deal with development in one way or another, not all the chapters share the interpretation of development as described in Chapter 1. Development as a concept unfolds in different ways throughout the book. It is central as is signalled by the title. The title of the book acknowledges that low-income households and communities remain a development priority since there are aspects of well-being that are much more difficult to achieve in low-income contexts. Although there might be different interpretations of *development* in various chapters, all would agree that the goal of development cannot be economic growth only, or the mere accumulation of wealth as money. Furthermore, all authors would agree that there are no easy solutions or quick fixes in progressing towards sustainable development, enhanced quality of life, and ultimately, planetary well-being. It is a tough task to work together towards these goals, especially in the low-income African context.

Even the globe might be too limited a context for thinking *globally*. Chapter 2 forces us to think of the whole creation. Chapter 1 emphasises the integrity of the Earth system in the time of the Anthropocene. The focus is on how human activity impacts the Earth system, rather than describing all factors that

influence the Earth system; for example, the impact of solar cycles on climate change. Chapter 2 makes the point that God created Earth and Heaven. This is a radically alternative meta-narrative to, for example, deep ecology or climate as a religious object. The chapter also signals the topic of technology, which is important throughout the book. When we act locally, we must act with technology, but always as a means and not an end. When thinking globally and recognising Heaven, as Chapter 2 encourages us to do, technology finds its proper place. It is an important place, as most chapters show. The interventions discussed in PART TWO of the book are intertwined with technology, without technology becoming autonomous or an aim in itself.

3. Act locally

In PART TWO, consisting of 5 chapters, several in situ projects conducted by the Nova Institute are described in the form of scholarly contributions to the applicable literature against the background of existing scientific and technical writings: air quality interventions, sustainable energy interventions, waste management projects, an early childhood development project, and sanitation solutions. The last-mentioned chapter on non-sewered sanitation practices has a decided philosophical import, aligning it with PART ONE.

The local action described in this book is intertwined with technology. Technical details, including chemical symbols, can be found throughout – even in a chapter dealing with government policy (Chapter 10). In dealing with, for example, air quality, technical solutions must be found, but they must be managed and mediated with the low-income families at the local level. Mediation is essential for the success of interventions, especially in the short term, as is emphasised in Chapter 6.

Efficient and effective management is also technology. Nova, the organisation that works together with households and network partners to improve the quality of life of low-income families, emphasises the right kind of step-by-step

management of its projects. Projects are grounded in scientific evidence where possible, but at least in facts. In this sense, Nova works scientifically; and science is respect for the facts or evidence. Much effort is invested in the development of robust tools to gather information and monitor and evaluate results. We hope that development agencies in other contexts will benefit from this approach and join in a scholarly conversation. Since, with this book, Nova also works with the output side of science to share findings and insights with the scholarly world. So, the book is not neo-Luddite and is broadly technology-friendly. It includes a chapter on the possible benefits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution which includes artificial intelligence for low-income households.

Acting locally obviously means taking wider contexts and ways of thinking in addition to global frameworks into consideration. This is shown in PART THREE. It deals with transversal issues that remain important in local interventions: the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the question of whether policy can be based on science, measuring the impacts of interventions on the quality of life, consultation versus collaboration and spatial justice. Each of these is intertwined with the projects of a development agent.

4. Working together in the local environment

The main aspect of the unity of the book is the global and local environment in which low-income households live. This environment is part of the Earth system in the Anthropocene, in the main experienced locally. Nova meets these households in their local environment and works with them towards improved quality of life and well-being. This *working together* can be described as a trans-disciplinary search for solutions with households and networks to develop a qualitatively better situation whereby the quality of life of households improves without compromising the integrity of the environment. A golden thread that runs through all the chapters is that this ongoing trans-disciplinary research, development, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation is a tough task. Several stakeholders participate in this endeavour, including

government and large industries. Look at the chapters making up the bulk of PART TWO. Every one of these aspects discussed in PART TWO impacts the health and well-being of low-income persons. Every one of them represents a task of government, specifically at the local level. Every one of them is the object of government policy and legislation. This comes out when one looks at the discussion of air quality and waste in Chapter 10 and compares it with PART TWO. Thus, Chapter 12 also addresses the measurement of the outcomes of interventions described in Chapter 4, and Chapter 11 deals with inequalities and service delivery that fails to put these inequalities right in the fields discussed in PART TWO.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the book starts by *thinking globally* about what an appropriate ultimate development goal in the time of the Anthropocene could be. An important insight to consider is that development could be interpreted as *qualitative growth into something better*, and not only *quantitative monetary growth*. That means that if humankind wants to grow into something qualitatively better, we need to consider that we are part of the Earth system. Furthermore, it serves as well to remember that the Earth system was not created by humankind. Interpreting ourselves as part of the larger creation means that the value of the Earth system cannot be derived only from our own evaluation of species and individuals. There is a greater meta-narrative to consider than only linking development to human and even Earth system prosperity. The drive to make a positive contribution towards planetary well-being in a local context is grounded and originates in the meaning that the actors, who participate in such initiatives, give to their actions. One of the most responsible ways to approach development in a local context is to take a trans-disciplinary approach. Such an approach values the participation of low-income households themselves as agents of their own development. Including households in the research and development process, where possible, is of great importance. Furthermore, trans-disciplinarity means applying rigorous scientific methods.

A scientific approach is valuable since it gathers evidence to determine the impact of interventions. When potential solutions are developed, these solutions must be tested with the end users to ensure that they work in their lifeworld. Trans-disciplinarity often also entails working with several stakeholders, which may include government, universities, local authorities, industries, churches, NGOs and other relevant role players depending on the specific task at hand.

And lastly, what we, the authors of this book, have learned from experience is that even if one has a noble goal and follows a responsible approach, it can still be a tough task to accomplish what one sets out to do. We have a huge development task still ahead of us, namely, to grow into something qualitatively better. This includes the responsibility to think globally and act locally towards finding ways with low-income households and networks to improve their quality of life, where they live locally, but also within the greater Earth system. It is a tough task to work towards planetary well-being, and we know that we will not succeed in every endeavour. But are we not called to grow into something qualitatively better?

List of Sources

Dubos, R.J. 1998. *So human an animal: how we are shaped by surroundings and events*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.