

Stewarding Sustainability Transformations

Petra Kuenkel

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An Emerging Theory and Practice of SDG
Implementation



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Foreword

In August 2018, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* published an article on possible trajectories of the Earth System (Steffens et al. 2018) that, if not halted in time, would cause serious danger for the entire ecosystem and subsequently for our societies and economies. The authors, a renowned group of international researchers, warn of self-reinforcing feedback mechanisms through human-induced emissions of greenhouse gases. Such pathways would severely endanger the stabilization of the climate and create a “hot-house Earth” that could change the conditions for life on Earth in an unprecedented way. The authors call for collective human action and emphasize the need for humanity’s stewardship role in collectively ensuring a safe pathway for human development. This, they argue, requires a shift in thinking toward seeing humankind as an integral part of the Earth System – and a much more responsible actor.

While the urgency to find pathways to collective action has grown, the insight that only human agency can change negative trajectories is not new. Since its inception in 1968, the message of the Club of Rome has always conveyed the need for a radical change in thinking – one that would enable humankind to reshape its relationship with planet Earth and economic development. Since then, the Club of Rome continued to encourage a systems-oriented perspective of an interconnected world development and called for ways of jointly tackling complex sustainability challenges across institutions, cultures, and national boundaries. It also emphasized holistic thinking and transdisciplinary collaboration, encouraging world leaders to take a long-term perspective and formulate future-oriented policies. The famous Club of Rome report, “Limits to Growth” (Meadows et al. 1972) – while heavily criticized by most policy-makers and economists – contributed strongly to a growing global awareness of an endangered life-support system, our planet Earth.

In 1977, the then president of the Club of Rome, Aurelio Peccei (1977), spoke of the need for a new and revolutionary humanism that he considered the foundation for stewarding man’s influence on the planet in harmony with nature. The subsequent Report to the Club of Rome that was titled “No Limits to Learning” encouraged the world to bring the human capability to learn fast center stage (Botkin et al. 1979). The 17 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the UN in 2015, underpin

a worldwide collective action approach encouraging governments to integrate the goals into their national development plans. While the agreement on the SDGs is a considerable advancement of humankind, their strictly technical implementation, particularly that of the 11 socioeconomic goals based on conventional growth policies, would make it virtually impossible to meet the three ecological goals. Without a serious shift in thinking that acknowledges the interconnectedness of the goals, the Agenda 2030, also called “Transforming Our World,” cannot be successful. Collaboration and collective action at all levels of the global society are considered important drivers of these transformations.

The 2018 Report to the Club of Rome titled “Come On – Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet” (Weizsäcker and Wijkman, 2018) addresses the necessary value shift by highlighting the discrepancy between wisdom and action as a philosophical crisis. While analyzing the foundations of philosophical thinking that contributed to the destruction of the planet, it comes to the conclusion that the world needs a “new enlightenment.” With a critical assessment of the old enlightenment that not only was Europe-centered but also overly emphasized rationalism, the report advanced a new thinking that invites complementarity, synergies, and balance as critical elements for a different way of approaching world development. The report makes clear, in order to overcome the greed, short-termism, and dangerous individualism that fuel the destruction of our common home, the Earth, new wisdom needs to acknowledge the complementarity of human and nature, markets and regulations, speed and stability, short term and long term, as well as outer action and inner resourcefulness. Transforming our world requires changing the approach to development and exploring the underlying mental models that drive human behavior.

Today, 50 years after the formation of the Club of Rome, it is still clear that current worldwide trends are not sustainable and that overcoming the philosophical crisis is more than urgent. This is, indeed, a foundation for the kind of collective stewardship necessary to stabilize planet Earth. The 2018 follow-on Report to the Club of Rome “A Finer Future” (Lovins et al. 2018) takes up these fundamental shifts and suggests concrete pathways to shift collective action toward an economy in service to life. Stewarding these transformations to regenerative economies is at the core of what needs to happen. It requires courageous and collaborative human agency at all levels of the global society and calls for collective stewardship based on a mindset that acknowledges the interconnectedness of the world.

Petra Kuenkel’s *Stewarding Sustainability Transformations* lays the theoretical foundation for this to happen. It also shows practical pathways to transformation literacy, which is defined as the skill to steward transformative change collectively across the boundaries of institutions, nations, sectors, and cultures. When you begin to read this book, we suggest that you fasten your seat belts. This new Report to the Club of Rome will take you on a journey of theory and practice that, if widely understood, will revolutionize the way we, or humankind as a whole, will approach our future. It will change the way we collectively make future. In the era of the Anthropocene, the time in the planetary history where the human footprint has begun to change the course of planetary evolution, we need to learn fast to act as

stewards of a livable future for all. The new report suggests that the concept of *systems aliveness* is key to anchoring approaches to global sustainability in a scientifically grounded, yet philosophical foundation. Drawing on many visionary and revolutionary scientific scholars as well as engaged practitioners, it shows that all life on this planet is ordered in patterns and most prominently thrives best with patterns that enhance systems aliveness. If this were not the case, life on this planet, including us as humans, would long be extinct.

The transdisciplinary research captured arrives at the *Patterns of Aliveness Theory* that uncovers six aliveness-enhancing principles inherent both in nature and human systems. But the book ventures far beyond theory. Petra Kuenkel shows how the principles inform collaboration initiatives for global and local change and how they can be integrated into the large systems change envisaged for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Collective stewardship can be adopted as a day-to-day management approach of governments, development agencies, corporations, and civil society activists. This book shows an incredible important and persuasive pathway to making this happen.

The Co-Presidents of the Club of Rome
August 30, 2018

Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker
Anders Wijkman

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Preface

The overarching aim of this book is to translate a systemic – and enlivening – worldview into the practice of stewarding transformative change for sustainability. It connects the emerging practice of collaboration between multiple stakeholders with the call for a new way of seeing the world and ourselves as part of nature. In that way, this book’s intention is civilizational. My hope is to contribute to bridging the gap between the so urgently needed renewed way of seeing the world as an interconnected whole and the practice of tangible action, for example, in climate change mitigation, integrated water resource management, poverty alleviation, renewable energy development, land restoration, or even in changing our economic system toward a regenerative economy.

What if we all knew the place within that is at home with the universe? What, if what lies behind the complex sustainability challenges we are facing in our world, behind the vicious cycles and wicked problems we are dealing with on a day-to-day basis at local as much as at global scale, are the same principles that we are part of and that – if we understood them much better – could take us into a sustainable future? What if we all knew how it feels to tend the common, the very force that nurtures all of us?

If we look at the world as a whole, there are uncounted numbers of people engaged for the betterment of the world. So many people are aware that humanity is at stake. It is increasingly becoming clear that unless we change course and see ourselves as part of nature, and acknowledge the limits of an endangering growth paradigm, we cannot become benign partners of the evolutionary process.

In my work as a strategic advisor to a large number of global, national, and local multi-stakeholder initiatives that aim at solving intractable sustainability challenges across societal sectors, institutions, nations, and cultures, I have met many people who were passionate about making a difference. They worked relentlessly to make collaborative efforts successful, because they knew that this would be the only pathway to take. It often struck me how they battled with structures that held unsustainable behavior patterns in place and yet how much they wanted to break out of old patterns of thinking and acting.

The fact that the world, for the first time in human history, has agreed on a set of 17 Global Sustainability Goals in the year 2015, is an encouraging shift toward looking at the world as a whole. Despite inherent contradictions between the goals, this is a breakthrough – not only because of the comprehensive written document specifying 169 agreed-upon targets that are necessary guiding structures. It is breakthrough, first, because the goals foster the slowly emerging mindset that humankind, indeed, could be able to take care of a global future, in which humanity and the nonhuman nature can thrive together. Second, and this tends to move into the background, it was a breakthrough, because of the way the goals emerged in a long and arduous process of multi-stakeholder collaboration that preceded their final formulation. If such a global collaboration process is possible, there is hope that humankind can learn from it and gradually adopt a stewarding role in partnering with nature rather than destroying the essence that makes us alive in this world.

In my last publication, *The Art of Leading Collectively* (2016), I ended with an invitation to join the collaboration journey toward a more sustainable world. I noted, “*while our sustainability challenges are complex, we have also grown a complexity of responses that will invite us to learn the art of leading collectively. But the dream is much bigger than just learning how to collaborate; it is also about remembering that we are human – and that the more human we are, the more we’re in tune with the planet to which we belong as humankind.*”

This book’s purpose is to take a planetary view and help readers become in tune with life’s process of generating life, because this is the core of the evolutionary process. We need to understand these fundamentals better, even if we might never be able to grasp the entire beauty and complexity of life’s processes.

While my professional practice since more than two decades focused on capacitating stakeholders from all societal actors to see collaboration as an opportunity to lead sustainability transformations collectively, I was increasingly inspired by the many facets of quantum physics and systems theory with all its branches into biology, ecology, economics, and psychology. I uncovered a thread of thinking that led to me a strikingly simple insight that many authors have alerted us to in a variety of ways: *Life’s intention is to create more life*. But it is not doing so in a mechanical way, on the contrary, it does it in an amazing beauty of generation and regeneration. We, most profoundly with our emotional sense of aliveness, are directly connected to this so immensely powerful force of evolution. With the acknowledgment that we cannot understand the life process in all its details in the sense of deconstructing the cause and effect relationships, this book shows how we can learn to see the patterns that enhance life. This understanding will shift our thinking about our role in this deeply interconnected world, which will subsequently inform our action.

I believe that the current means of global communication invite us to rethink our role in an interconnected world. It encourages us to more explicitly know what we already know – that we co-create our world every day, from local to global scale and vice versa; and that we do so together with nature, because we are part of it. But this book goes beyond suggesting a new philosophy. It connects to the tangible collective actions the world needs.

The huge sustainability challenges we have in the world follow the same underlying patterns and principles as the solutions to the problems we can find and as the processes required to continuously find new solutions. Both are driven by the urge for aliveness, yet, while most wicked problems of today's sustainability challenges have become vicious cycles of unbalanced patterns, the solutions, that we need to find – however temporary they may be – need to be co-constructed as functional patterns that enhance life in systems from small to large.

This book's purpose, therefore, is to show that conceptualizing, planning, and implementing transformative change processes toward sustainability can be based on an understanding of aliveness principles translated into the daily practice of managing change. This will help us to become more conscious partners of the co-evolutionary process – and not its enemies. It will help many actors to become transformation literate and jointly discover sustainable pathways for a responsible Anthropocene.

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Petra Kuenkel

Text on the Club of Rome

This book has been approved as a “Report to the Club of Rome,” a series of publications which started in 1972 with famous report *The Limits to Growth*. The Club of Rome is a proactive network of pioneering thinkers, scientists, and practitioners with a global systems-oriented perspective. They share a common concern for the future of humanity, analyze global sustainability challenges, and promote collective stewardship for the Earth System. In order to become a “Report to the Club of Rome,” a publication has to be innovative, has to present new approaches, and has to be based on sound scientific evidence. The acceptance as a “Report to the Club of Rome” indicates that the Club of Rome appreciates and promotes the publication as an important intellectual contribution but does not mean that all members share all of the thoughts presented in the book.

Acknowledgments

The journey of writing a book, which touches a topic as complex as global sustainability transformations, begins long before the actual writing process. It emerges from increasing inquiry into how humankind could become more aware of its many ways of co-creating future, including their ability to change their choices collectively. This book captures more than two decades of integrating theory and practice. It draws on extensive experience in accompanying many complex international multi-stakeholder initiatives for sustainability. New ways of collaborating across sectors and institutions were paramount for their success. The practice triggered also thorough research inquiry into living systems theory, constructivism, and finally academic and practitioner discourses on global sustainability transformations. It has been supported and inspired by the advent of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which, for the first time in the history of humankind, seem to become a reference point for an imagined future to which all of humankind can contribute. The book's content idea matured in many conversations that started long before the actual writing but continued throughout. These conversations took place during conferences, workshops, and bilateral meetings. Insights emerged in these conversations and invited further literature research. In that way many people contributed to this dissertation consciously or unconsciously. I am grateful to all those who knowingly or unknowingly added a further piece to a complex puzzle as supporters, critics, and encouragers. Many encounters with people from academia shaped this journey into an emerging theory. But beyond the uncounted inspiring contributors, I want to especially thank Helena Wagener from South Africa for her continuous encouragement to name the essentials of the emerging theory and to Steve Waddell from the United States for his passion for large systems change that inspired me tremendously. I am also extremely grateful to Dr. Ginny Belden-Charles for accompanying me throughout the journey from conceptualizing to suggesting improvements, to Sheila McNamee from the Taos Institute for her uniquely supportive role, and to Prof. Vala Ragnarsdottir for her inputs and recommendations.

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About the Author



Petra Kuenkel is a full Member of the International Club of Rome and the Executive Director of the Collective Leadership Institute, a Germany and South Africa-based social enterprise building collaboration competency for transformative change toward world sustainability. As a seasoned systems scientist, visionary author, and expert in complex multi-stakeholder settings, she promotes systems transformations by scaling-up collective stewardship skills for decision-makers from corporations, public sector, and civil society. With her educational background in change management, organizational psychology, and political science, she has profound international experiences in corporate change, development cooperation, and policy implementation. She is a leading strategic advisor to pioneering international initiatives that tackle sustainability challenges. Based on successful transformation processes, she developed the *dialogic change methodology* and the *Collective Leadership Compass*, a guiding tool for navigating change in complex multi-actor settings. Kuenkel’s groundbreaking publication *The Art of Leading Collectively: Co-Creating a Sustainable, Socially Just Future* received international attention; her writings have appeared in numerous professional journals as well as *The Guardian* and *The Huffington Post*. For more information, please visit www.collectiveleadership.com or www.clubofrome.org.

Acronyms

4C	Common Code for the Coffee Community
AFI	Alliance for Financial Inclusion
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit
CE	Circular Economy
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DKV	German Coffee Association
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPEDC	Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation
GRLI	Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative
GWP	Global Water Partnership
ICO	International Coffee Organization
ILO	International Labor Organization
IWRM	Integrated Water Resource Management
LSC	Large Systems Change
MNC	Multinational Corporation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
QDI	Quality of Development Index
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solution Network
SITRA	Finnish Innovation Fund
SRC	Stockholm Resilience Centre
UN	United Nations
UNGC	United Nations Global Compact
US	United States
VUCADD	Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity, Diversity, Dynamics
WBGU	German Advisory Board Global Change
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature