

Chapter 9

Everything is Connected—Envisioning How a Regenerative World Looks Like



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“If we don’t know where we want to go, it makes little difference that we make great progress”
Donella Meadows

Abstract The rationale for why visioning a regenerative world in the future is presented. Based on the visioning strategy of Donella Meadows, the future is envisioned from 2021 on. In addition to answering the questions of Meadows of how a regenerative world would look like, the importance of building a sustainable economy is outlined, an economy that regenerates the natural world and communities. Several models have been outlined, and in this chapter, the focus is on the wellbeing economy, the regenerative economy in service of life, and the doughnut economy. An action plan of how to direct the economy to be within planetary boundaries based on degrowth for the global North is presented. Other systems are briefly outlined as being important including sustainable natural- and food systems. All of these systems are interconnected in a complex manner and therefore need to be studied together.

Keywords Visioning · Sustainable future · Sustainable economy · Wellbeing economy · Regenerative economy · Doughnut economy · Degrowth

9.1 Introduction: The Importance of Visioning

Donella Meadows was a master of visioning a sustainable future. As a system thinker and system dynamics modeler, she taught people around the world visioning. In one of Meadows’ most quoted papers “Envisioning a sustainable world” (Meadows, 1996), she emphasizes that vision is the most vital step in the policy process, yet she stated, vision is not only missing almost entirely from policy discussion—it is missing from the whole culture. In the quarter of a century since her paper was published, little has changed in our education and policy making. In this chapter, I will revisit the *Envisioning a sustainable world* of Meadows and add to that wisdom what I

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have gathered since 2008, when I started to teach my Sustainable Futures class—first at the University of Bristol in the UK and then at the University of Iceland. In that class, the students work together in various settings to envision and propose sustainability solutions globally, nationally, locally, and personally. Every year, they come up with new ideas. This class has been my favorite teaching endeavor since I started my teaching career, because in the class I go from being the professor who delivers the knowledge to being the facilitator who fosters the students to think together and come up with new visions and solutions toward sustainability. Wisdom and knowledge on sustainability thinking that I have included in my class have been fortunate to gain from the Schumacher Society UK and their leading annual lectures, The Royal Society of Arts and Commerce UK, Be the Change conferences in London, the Balaton Group and their annual meeting, The Club of Rome, the Schumacher Institute UK, and regular discussions with members of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance.

I have been fortunate to get many visitors to participate in my Sustainable Futures class, to contribute their expert knowledge, and lead workshops—either online or in person. This has enriched the class and the thinking that has emerged among the students. Examples of participating sustainability experts that I have called upon include the late Richard StGeorge (Schumacher Society, Bristol, UK), Alan AtKisson (formerly AtKisson Group, Sweden, now SIDA, Sweden), Sarah Cornell (Stockholm Resilience Centre, University of Stockholm, Sweden), Brynhildur Davidsdottir (Environment and Natural Resources program, University of Iceland), Harald Sverdrup (formerly University of Lund, Sweden, and University of Iceland now Norwegian Inland University of Applied Sciences), Trista Patterson (UNEP partner GRID, Arendal, Norway), Arran Stibbe (University of Gloucestershire, UK), Bente Elisabeth Endresen (Gallery Mols, Aarhus, Denmark), Petra Kuenkel (Collective Leadership Institute, Potsdam, Germany), and Monica Schüldt (Klarhet, Stockholm, Sweden). These experts brought into focus various perspectives that are important for sustainability thinking—including the wisdom of E.F. Schumacher, system thinking, science/policy interface, ecological economics, system analysis, visioning, sustainability literacy, art, collective leadership, and the time to think environment. In addition, I have also been fortunate to have several young teaching assistants who have brought in their perspectives of for example ecological footprinting, education for sustainable development, sustainable fisheries, gender perspectives, food security, natural resource management, and scenario building.

9.2 Sustainable World Future Visioning

Donella Meadows (1996) put forward *her vision of a sustainable future*. It included that renewable resources are used no faster than they regenerate, and that pollution is emitted no faster than it can be recycled or rendered harmless. Furthermore, her vision included that prices internalize all costs, and there is no poverty. In addition,

her vision was that population is either stable or decreasing and that there is no hunger. I refer to this as the “basics” for a vision of a sustainable future.

Meadows also encouraged people to think about *their home in a sustainable world*. How would it look like? She had several sub-questions. Here, I answer the question from my own perspective for future Iceland. My water comes from clean groundwater and on my balcony and at our family’s summer house, there are trees with berries, and productive herbs, and vegetables growing. I am a member of an allotment scheme. My energy is renewable. Some good friends live nearby, and we meet regularly to share stories, and our harvests. All waste is minimized, sorted, and recycled. Biological waste is composted and put back into the soil. Children, adults with needs, and the elderly are cared for in a secure and fun-filled environment. I feel joyful when I wake up in the morning.

What would work look like in a sustainable world?—another question set by Meadows. Here are my answers: Sustainability is at the top of my teaching agenda—for ecosystems, soils, communities, and the economy which drives our activities. In a sustainable world, I am a teacher, facilitator, and trainer and an academic on sustainability issues. I am paid by my university, which is funded by the government. I am happy to share my knowledge and vision with others, free of charge. I work with people around the world who share my vision and passion for a sustainable world. We work together online and in person when we have the opportunity to meet. I go to work on foot/by bike/by bus/by electric car or I work at home. My work is my passion and I feel good.

How do communities look like in a sustainable world?—yet another of Meadows’ questions. In my sustainable world my answers are that people live in harmony with nature. The physical systems that sustain them are sustainable for energy and food as well as for energy and materials. I work with people locally and around the world that share my vision and passion for a sustainable world. People use conflict-free language and everyone’s voice counts in decision making. Also, everyone is valued, young/old, male/female/transgender, whatever talent, skills, or education. People live together in peace and collaboration, meet regularly, and talk to each other in respectful manner as well as caring about each other’s wellbeing.

Donella Meadows’ next question was *what does my nation look like when sustainable?* My answers to the questions are that Iceland meets its physical needs in a sustainable manner. The majority of all food is produced in the country. All kinds of people, goods, and information travel peacefully to and from my country to other places. Decisions are made through respectful dialogues where everyone’s voice counts and listening is an important practice, both for internal and external conflicts. My nation is diverse. Other nations and ethnic groups are respected both within borders and abroad.

The final question of Donella was *what are my feelings in a sustainable world?* In my vision, the answers to the questions are that people are fascinated by keeping their lives and nation sustainable. People minimize travel and enjoy their near environment. Progress is seen in everything that makes the world even more sustainable or better regenerative. Everyday life is respectful with good balance between work and private life. Everyone has strong connection with nature. People work on finding

The questions now are how do we get from the degraded world (Fig. 9.1) we are in, to a regenerated healthy world, with the wellbeing of nature and people at its center? First, we have to acknowledge that it is the growth economy that is the destructive driving force for nature and society. In our current global North, far too many people are lonely and perplexed, have low self-esteem, poor mental health, etc. (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). The favorite life-fulfilling pass-time of all too many is shopping for more new things and has been questioned by many (e.g., Stewart, 2018). The throwaway culture is prevailing. With my sustainability hat on, it is only possible to go toward a healthy planet with healthy people by first changing the economic goal, then redefine the new economy. This will be discussed in the sections below. The focus is on the new economy, regenerative natural world, and wellbeing in society. The focus is on the new economy because all other transformations needed will follow and/or come in tandem. Without new economy tinkering, changing other systems will not bring us the regenerative world that provides equity and wellbeing for people and the rest of nature.

9.3 Sustainable Economy

How does the economy look like in a sustainable world? And how does the world look like once we have adopted this new economy? As outlined Chap. 8, there is now more and more a focus on a new economy that would allow the Earth system to become not only sustainable but regenerative. But this is only possible if the economic system has the goal of being within the Earth boundaries.

9.3.1 *Wellbeing Economy*

Costanza et al. (2014, 2016, 2018, 2020a, b, c) have laid out the foundation of how a new economy must look like that fosters wellbeing instead of GDP growth. The aim is also to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We refer to a society that has such goals as the Republic of Wellbeing. In the Republic of Wellbeing, nature is regenerated, business has environmental and social responsibility policies that they follow, and the economy is regenerative—investing in business that regenerates nature and society. Government undertakes inequality reporting in order to eradicate poverty and to prevent actions to work against each other. The constitution has sustainability written into it to protect nature and the living world. There are maps of electoral programs in order to make sure all regions get the attention they need. Government supports societal progress. A living democracy thrives with active citizen. The citizen are healthy—physically and mentally. Wellbeing is achieved for people and the living world, and finally, ecosystems have human rights similar to people and corporations.



Fig. 9.2 Vision of a regenerated planet. The economy has become circular and steady state. Society has healthy and happy citizen who share resources, grow their own food, care about each other, repair gadgets, and make their own condiments. Nature has been regenerated, wild animal flourish, and agriculture is regenerative according to agroecology principles. The urban areas are clean and sustainable. Graphics: Elín Elísabet

Figure 9.2 shows my vision of a regenerated sustainable world where the economy has become circular and steady state (or started degrowth in the developed world); the citizens are cooperative, feel happy, share their profit, and grow their own food; their energy is renewable; they repair their gadgets. Furthermore, nature has been restored and is regenerative. The commons have been extended. Wellbeing of people and nature has been achieved.

As outlined above recently, the idea of the “wellbeing economy” has been promoted with the purpose to deliver shared wellbeing on a healthy planet (Costanza et al., 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020a, b, c; Fioramonte, 2017; Hough-Stewart, 2019): wellbeing of people, wellbeing of nature and equitable distribution of wealth. For a healthy planet, it means that economic, investment, and financial activities need to be directed toward regenerating nature and creating just societies. It also means removing the key destructive drivers on nature to allow its natural powers to heal and restore (Ragnarsdottir & Parker, 2022).

The current economic growth agenda can no longer continue. A new focus is needed on the wellbeing of people and regeneration of nature and societies. The public want a wellbeing agenda, and it is not a new concept. The focus on providing wellbeing as a primary role of the state with all its human and ecological dimensions

has been advocated in Northern societies as a social and economic goal since early nineteenth century Utopian socialists in the UK, such as William Morris (Ragnarsdottir & Parker, 2022). A more recent approach was pioneered by the former king of Bhutan, and after him, the first Prime Minister of Bhutan and the current king. At their invitation, a number of people (including myself) came together first at the UN in 2012 and later the following year in Timphu, the capital of Bhutan, to discuss how to include Bhutan's emphasis on Gross National Happiness (GNH)¹ into the (then being developed) UN Sustainable Development Goals. The seventeen Goals with 169 targets give a broad development focus of which GDP growth is only one disputed target, because for achieving the other 16 goals growth cannot continue in the developed world, but it needs to be achieved in the global South.

Move along to 2017 where the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) was founded by many of the Bhutan-goers in order to bring together all thinkers on the new economy. Over 200 individuals, organizations, academics, communities, and businesses across the globe have joined WEAll.² Also, governments have joined under the banner of Wellbeing Economies Governments³ (WEGo)—at the leadership of the First Minister of Scotland. They include Iceland, New Zealand, Wales, and Finland. Could it be a coincidence that four out of the five countries/regions are led by women? Chapter 14 outlines the Wellbeing Economy agenda of Wales.

9.3.2 *Regenerative Economy in Service of Life*

Hunter Lovins et al. (2018) outline an economy in service of life, giving the principles that are needed to transition to such an economy. After studying regenerative agriculture, evolutionary biology, systems science, positive psychology, humanistic management, and ecological economics, they sought as ultimate goal an economic vision based on regenerative biological systems.

Such a regenerative economic system was first outlined by John Fullerton (2015). Fullerton describes how to build the regenerative economy through holistic thinking and pattern recognition. The regenerative economy is beyond the restorative economy that is based on regenerating natural system design. He promotes the regenerative economy with application of natural laws and patterns of systemic health. Such socioeconomic systems need to have self-organization, self-renewal, and regenerative vitality similar to natural systems.

Conventional degenerating economy (i.e., the current neoliberal paradigm) with mechanistic design and reductionist thinking is all in parts and both resource- and energy greedy. The “green” economy (with a focus on renewables and fewer resources, but otherwise business as usual) is not a solution, neither is the “sustainable” economy with less energy and material requirements. Fullerton proclaims the

¹ <https://gnh.institute/>.

² <https://wellbeingeconomy.org/>.

³ <https://wellbeingeconomy.org/wego>.

need to go beyond sustainability—first to restorative economy and then to the regenerative economy, built on patterns and principles that nature uses to build stable, healthy, and sustainable systems throughout the world, when undisturbed. The question now becomes, how do we build the regenerative economy?

Fullerton (2015) has set forth eight *principles* for the regenerative economy by applying nature's laws and patterns of systemic health, self-organization, self-renewal, and regenerative vitality to socioeconomic systems. Others like to refer to eight *patterns* (e.g., the social enterprise Positive⁴). Fullerton's principles as outlined in Lovins et al. (2018) are right relationship; innovative, adaptive, and responsive; views wealth holistically; empowered participation; robust circular flow; edge effect abundance; seeks balance; and honors community and place.

In more detail, the eight principles are:

(1) *Right relationship*: Human economy is embedded in **culture** which is embedded in the biosphere. The continuation of life is sacred. All systems—from molecular scale and all the way to cosmic scale—are nested, interconnected, and defined by overarching relationships of mutualism, within which day-to-day exchanges take place. (2) *Innovative, adaptive, and responsive*: Humans are innately **creative** and entrepreneurial. Humans have innate ability to innovate and “create a new” across all sectors of society. Even in failure, we “begin again.” (3) *Views wealth holistically*: True wealth is not money in the bank, but wellbeing of the whole, depending on belonging, community, and community-stewarded assets. It is achieved through the harmonization of the multiple forms of capital, with systemic health only as strong as the weakest link. Wellbeing depends on belonging, on community, and on an array of community-stewarded assets. (4) *Empowered participation*: People long to be part of something bigger than themselves, with wealth equitably distributed in context of systemic health. All participants in a system must be empowered to participate in and contribute to the health of the whole. Beyond whatever moral beliefs one may hold, financial and non-financial wealth must be equitably shared, although not necessarily equally distributed in the context of expanded understanding of systemic health. (5) *Robust circulatory flow*: Resources (material and non-material) must circulate up and down the system efficiently and effectively. Circular economy concepts for material and energy are important. (6) *Edge effect abundance*: Creative **collaborations across sectors** of the economy increase value-changes and resilience. (7) *Seeks balance*: Economic systems are designed for a **balance** of efficiency and resilience, built on patterns and principles that mirror those found in healthy, resilient natural systems. (8) *Honors community and place*: Nurturing healthy, stable communities and regions, real and virtual, in a connected mosaic of place-centered economics. There can be a dynamic, global economy so long as it ensures that every place, every ecosystem has integrity.

Continuing from the work of Fullerton (2015), recently a group of academics suggest what makes a society healthy (Fath et al., 2019). It is based on research on complex adaptive systems, flow networks, and ecosystem- and socioeconomic dynamics. They set forth ten principles in four categories to undergird systemic

⁴ <https://www.makeapositiveimpact.co/>.

economic health for measuring regenerative economics. Fath et al. (2019) propose a story that underpins the conclusions about the need for strategies to achieve the goals of a regenerative wellbeing economy. They set forth economic success in an integrated and measurable framework that includes robust circulation, balanced and integrated structures, investing in human and natural capacities, collaborative learning, and the dangers of concentration and extraction. These principles need to be discussed in society and taken up by policy makers.

9.3.3 *Doughnut Economy and Beyond*

The regenerative economy principles hold in the doughnut economics model of Kate Raworth (2017), that is cleverly set within the nine planetary boundaries of Rockström et al. (2009), providing similar social foundation of human needs as first defined by Max-Neef (1991) within the safe operating space for humanity. This provides the foundation for a regenerative and distributive economy. Both the principles for the regenerative economy and the doughnut representation are good basis for the way forward, but how do we implement them? Already the city of Amsterdam⁵ is using the doughnut economic model for future city developments, and Costa Rica is on the same path. There are over hundred cities, regions, and countries adopting the doughnut model through the Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL).⁶ The good news thus is that there is positive change already happening which is worth following.

Other important issues pertaining to new economy are presented in the introduction to this book part (Chap. 8). Taken together, they lead us toward achieving transition literacy. Chapter 13 outlines the benefits of the not-for-profit economy as an important contribution to the new economy.

9.3.4 *Action Plan for Installing a New Economy Based on Degrowth*

It is now clear that in order to achieve the goals I have outlined in this chapter that a new economy must halt growth in the developed world and allow growth in the developing world. The principles of degrowth therefore must be at the core of the action plan. This has been set forth by Jason Hickel (2020).

Hickel's action plan may not be perfect, but it makes a lot of sense—so here it is in an abbreviated version: First **pull the emergency brake**: *End planned obsolescence; cut advertising; shift from ownership to usership; end food waste; and scale down ecologically destructive industries.* Second **shorten working week** to

⁵ <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/circular-economy/amsterdam-doughnut-economics.html>.

⁶ <https://doughnuteconomics.org/>.

improve quality of life, give people time of pursuing interests and also share jobs; **reduce inequality** by introducing a living wage and set income ratio maximums (maximum/minimum) to something like 10/1; **decommodify public goods and expand the commons; embrace abundance** instead of scarcity (capitalism depends on artificial scarcity, and austerity is synonym of scarcity); **embrace the law of the jubilee** and cancel debt (e.g., student debt, developing countries debt); **create new money for a new economy**—create money by state banks that are free of debt and spend it in the economy (instead of lending it), in lieu of money being built on debt created by commercial banks as it is now; **through a post-capitalist imaginary** create an economy where people produce and sell useful goods and services, an economy where people make rational, informed decisions about what to buy, an economy where people get compensated fairly for their labor, an economy that satisfies human needs while minimizing waste, an economy that circulates money to those who need it, an economy where innovation makes better, longer-lasting products, reduces ecological pressure, frees up labor time and improves human welfare, an economy that responds to the health of the ecology on which it depends; **capture democracy from elites**—reject lobbyism and political capture of minority elites, who are happy to liquidate everything instead of the preferences of the majority who want to sustain our planet’s ecology for future generations. Kick money out of politics—focus on radical media reforms, strict campaign finance laws, reversing corporate personhood, dismantle monopolies, shifting to cooperative ownership structures, putting workers on company boards, democratize shareholder votes, democratize institutions of global governance, and managing collective resources as commons whenever possible.

This action plan set forth in *Less is More* (Hickel, 2020) is the best one I have come across and is therefore outlined above. It goes beyond principles, values, and frameworks and forces us to think about the important steps that we need to take toward the new economy we need for a regenerative, just world for the wellbeing of all.

9.4 Beyond the Economy—Visioning Other Sustainable Systems

9.4.1 Sustainable Natural- and Food Systems

Two decades into the twenty-first century, many of the questions pertaining to a sustainable world involve sustainable food production, sustainable soil, and sustainable forestry. Currently, the concept of sustainable is though not being used as much as resilient, healthy, and regenerative. Recent reports have demonstrated devastating degradation of the natural world (e.g., IBPES, 2019), that it is not enough to generate sustainable systems from the damaged systems that we have today, it is necessary to regenerate lost and severely degraded natural systems, so that they become healthy

and resilient to shock. With climate change, the regenerated systems may have to be somewhat different from the natural system that was in location say 50 years ago, because climate change has created new conditions for life to prosper.

How does a food production system look like in a sustainable world? Since World War II, industrial agricultural systems have degraded in terms of soil degradation (30% of soil severely degraded) that is visible by reduced soil health through the loss of soil mass, soil organic matter, and thus soil fertility, and there it is a need to shift to regenerative practices that are based on learning from ecosystems. Such agro-ecological practices (also referred to as regenerative agriculture) are already well known and have been called for by FAO (2015) as being the way forward to ensure food security for all as well as mitigating global warming (Spratt et al., 2021). Chapter 10 outlines how to use system analysis to achieve sustainable forestry.

9.4.2 Sustainable Communities and WellBeing

Chapter 11 focuses on achieving sustainable cohesion in a farming community, and Chap. 12 is about how to build wellbeing of people. The ultimate goal of the new economy is wellbeing for all people and nature. Chapter 14 presents the policies that Wales has adapted in order to build a wellbeing society.

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