Chapter 18
From Sustainability to Thrivability: Transforming Systems with Purpose

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Abstract The contemporary landscape of challenges to survival, sustainability, and the possibility of flourishing on and with Earth are not the same today as when the Kyoto Manifesto was first written. Fortunately, neither are the tools at our disposal to deal with them. From conceptual to technological to behavioral, the systemic responses being developed appear to be appropriate to the task. However, it is critical that these responses be neither under-conceptualized nor over-constrained in their design and implementation. Through the power of collective intelligence and driven by the very experience of a global pandemic, a new norm for collective wellbeing is emerging in action. This chapter explores the key aspects of both the imperatives for this type of response as well as the practices emerging at the cutting edge of society. These focus not only on the necessary-but-not-sufficient objectives of survival and sustainability, but on the true potential of regeneration and thrivability to create the conditions for flourishing through the dynamics of circularity and inclusion of living systems in all our relations—with ourselves, each other, nature, past and future generations, and the underlying evolutionary dynamics of change.

Keywords Thrivability · Systems · Circularity · Humaning · Metrics · Covid19 · Pandemic · Regenerative economy · Regenerative systems · Behaviour · Behavioural change

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What we call *sustainability* goes by various names and terms in other languages. In some, such as Spanish, there is a distinction between 'sustainability' as *sostenibilidad*: the ability to support something by propping it up and keeping it from collapsing; and 'sustainability' as *sustentabilidad*: the ability to nurture a pattern of emergence in ways that foster its evolution. In English, we don't make that distinction since we have only one word: sustainability. So some went ahead and added the modifier 'development' after the term in an effort to specify that we wish to indicate strategies that ensure the evolutionary maintenance of an increasingly robust and supportive environment; regenerative strategies that identify opportunities for increasing the dynamic stability and self-sufficiency of an individual, a group, or a society by indicating areas of socio-economic potential to be developed to the advantage of all the stakeholders involved—both those who benefit from the system at present, as well as those who stand to benefit from the system in the future. The fact that these times represent an unprecedented challenge to our economy, our way of thinking, and our way of life as a species on this planet is the source of both great despair and great hope. There can be no doubt we live in VUCA times — characterized by events and situations that are Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. In our daily experience, this easily translates to RUPT experiences — when we sense that everything is too Rapid, Unpredictable, Paradoxical, and Tangled. These acronyms have become commonplace in contemporary writings on change management and change leadership, the former more frequently in scientific and analytical studies and the latter more in social and psychological reports. These new frames of systemic conceptualization point to how easy it has become to feel overwhelmed, trapped, and too small to cope with the contemporary dynamics of change. Especially when the information we have at our disposal re-emphasizes its VUCA nature. The combined threat posed by the global Covid19-pandemic, the looming economic crisis, resource scarcity, the underlying climate crisis, the threat to biodiversity, and even the possibility of human extinction may prove to be the biggest and most extensive test of our capacity — both individually and collectively — to rise to the challenge of our times and respond with evolutionary smarts.

In collaboration with an international network, we at the Bertalanffy Center engage in action research to enable these advantages with and for all stakeholders with awareness to the evolutionary patterns and structures that arise from the interdependence of guiding regulations, multi-level governance and empowering metrics and the system dynamics of embodied inter-subjectivity which determines the purpose of our individual and collective behaviour and the emergence of enlivening narratives, guided by collective worldviews.

18.1 A History of Multi-level Governance: The Emergence of SDGs as Guiding Self-regulations

When the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were issued in 2000, a period of 15 years for halving extreme poverty rates, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education in developing countries seemed ambitious, but doable. They were agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions in a multi-national, multi-level governance effort, to meet the needs of the world's poorest.

By 2015 the world had changed in many ways: the target of reducing extreme poverty rates by half had been met already five years ahead of the 2015 deadline! Nevertheless, extreme poverty in certain areas still exists—nearly 10% of the world's population live from $1.90 a day and 12.9% in 2014 remained undernourished. Primary school enrolment figures could be raised impressively, but the goal of achieving universal primary education had been missed. The fight against diseases showed mixed results: while new HIV/AIDS infections decreased, almost half the world's population is at risk of malaria. The fact that humanity is setting global development goals, and making progress on reaching them, is evidence of a new era in the collective self-determination of our species. These approaches are emerging in response to the shifting set of challenges facing humanity today. There are five mega-trends that we, as a species, are learning to cope with and respond to:

- Globalization of markets—business is increasingly moving to 24/7/365 non-stop modalities of production and service availability
- Globalization of technologies—information processing and communications technologies permit, foster, and encourage the globalization of markets genetics, nano-tecnology, robotics, Smart Data, IoT, deep AI, VR, AR, AE[1] → disruptive individually; explosive when combined
- Evironmental pressures—increasing interdependencies between human and natural systems with threshold limit implications given the finite carrying capacity of local and global biomes
- Geo-political and socio-economic challenges—a fundamentally new reality with regard to the potential for systemic crises as well as for opportunities to transcend them
- Health and wellbeing—Individual and collective responses to global pandemics and the necessity for greater reliance on technology mediated interactions

The particular pressures exerted on humanity by the challenge of coping with a global pandemic has resulted in the need for an entirely new social transaction system. Clearly, no one person or team can create the needed pathways to viable futures in isolation—we are all in this together. Official development assistance from wealthy countries to developing countries increased by 66% reaching $135.2 billion—but since it was not designed as global partnerships for development it did not lead to

[1] IoT = Internet of Things; AI = Artificial Intelligence; VR = Virtual Reality; AR = Augmented Reality; AE = Artificial Empathy. Each of these represent distinct technological advances.

widespread improvement in people's living conditions, where needed the most (The World Bank, 2019). Important improvements had been achieved, as exemplified in the data excerpts above, yet not enough to make a significant difference. Further issues had added complexity, uncertainty, and urgency on many different levels calling for actions. A new set of goals was to be built on the Millennium Development Goals to complete what these did not achieve.

Based on the remaining tasks and due to the pressure that climate change induced natural disasters, and eco-systems decline have put on populations in all parts of the world, an enhanced systemic approach to change has been developed. To guide all existing interests into the same direction, the 193 member states of the United Nations started a multi-stakeholder process that lasted three years. Upon deliberations of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 2012, and its outcome document "The Future We Want", the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was established (United Nations, 2019). In 2013, the UN General Assembly set up a 30-member Open Working Group to develop a proposal on subsequent goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The annual Forum on Sustainable Development serves as the central UN platform for the follow-up and review of the SDGs, where member states must report their progress. As a result, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 SDGs at its core was adopted in the general assembly meeting at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York in September 2015. It was considered as a landmark for multilateralism and international policy shaping. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* was adopted the same year as the *Paris Agreement on Climate Change* (December 2015) and refers to it in SDG 14.

All member states agreed and committed themselves to achieve the 17 Global Goals for Sustainable Development at national, regional, and international level by 2030. Addressing the multiple challenges humanity is facing to achieve well-being, improve health, education and gender equity, economic prosperity, and environmental protection for all, they provide a holistic and multidimensional view on development rather than a restricted set of dimensions and targets (Pradhan et al., 2017), an approach which truly can be called systemic. While there has been much discussion about the spread of false or misleading information via media in recent years, the rise of digital technologies and the concomitant pressures of new behavioral norms driven by a global pandemic, knowledge access has also migrated from specialized, localized knowledge "hot spots" to the Internet. The old hot spots were physical brick-and-mortar libraries, schools and universities. Not only do these hot spots now exist in virtual form online, but structured learning environments that deliver access to them make knowledge acquisition an easy-access and on-demand affair.

18.2 From Self-regulation to an Empowering SDG Metrics

To reach the SDGs, a global plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity has been developed. Additionally, each of the 17 goals is supplemented by a set of targets to demonstrate the scale and ambition of this new universal agenda and to balance the four dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social, cultural, and environmental. The interlinkages and the integrated nature of the goals and targets are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new agenda is realised. As all 17 goals are interdependent, reaching the targets will sometimes lead to synergies as well as to trade-offs (Pradhan et al., 2017) and thus cause a massive institutional challenge at both national and international levels following Ashby´s law of requisite variety (1958). This law states that a system needs to increase its variety of responses to the number of challenges that its environment produces in order for it to be able to deal successfully with the diversity in its environment. In 2016, the 169 targets supporting the Goals were provided with a proposed list of 230 SDG indicators developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs, 2016) as a practical starting point for action.

Taking, for example, certain actions related to SDG 6, 7, 11, 12 and 15 will generate synergies and co-benefits for other SDGs. Investments in wastewater treatment with energy co-production may simultaneously contribute to increasing water (SDG 6) and energy (SDG 7) security, public health (SDG 3) and contribute toward more sustainable cities (SDG 11) (IIASA, 2018). Actors and decision makers should be aware of these affects when developing and designing measures and strategies. The greatest risk we face to reach the goals is delaying urgent decisions and actions, the greatest barriers are competitiveness and acting in silos. Some member states govern their public policy sectors, such as health, energy, agriculture, and education, through sectoral ministries and agencies, while others don't—leading to a lack of joint agendas and coordination often resulting in inefficient or even contradictory policy actions within and among states. Target 17.14 can therefore serve as a reflection of the aspirations that already exist at the national level to work across policy sectors. This will also entail a political exercise, as political, institutional and cognitive limitations to how large complex problems can be addressed in policy making (Nilsson, 2016). The currently ongoing national responses to the pandemic may not serve as a blueprint for collective action to tackle global warming and biodiversity loss, but some of the multi-lateral activities already provide us with some hope for the necessary change.

According to the 2019 report of *the Bertelsmann Stiftung* and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, there are mainly 3–4 SDGs in which all countries are at risk stagnating or experiencing a deterioration: 12 (Sustainable Consumption & Production), 13 (Climate Action), 14 (Life below Water), and 15 (Life on Land). Thus, no country on Earth is on track when it comes to achieving the full range of the SDGs. Even the countries that are generally at the top of most development rankings still need to invest a lot of effort (Sachs et al., 2019). In regard of the

current political situation in Europe and the polarisation trend in international politics, the authors suggest also to bring SDG 10 into the focus, as inequalities within or among states can prove to be an enormous barrier for positive transformation and collaboration. Countries and regions, governments, the private sector and civil society are still called upon to implement and bring this plan to life through collaborative global multi-actor partnerships to mobilise and share knowledge, expertise, capacity building, technology, and financial resources, thereby making SDG 17 the key-goal to achieve all of them. Especially as the most debated issue of growth needs to be addressed together and is different for industrialized countries than for developing and emerging countries. While the former need to invest in regenerative systems for production and sustainable consumption, the latter will need to unlock their potential in the most sustainable and regenerative way. Collaborative partnerships we can pave the way for shortcuts to clean and sustainable lifestyles for millions in emerging countries, without detouring to environmentally and socially damaging processes that industrial states were going through to progress. Likewise, industrialized countries can learn from the possibly frugal innovations of emerging countries how to anchor awareness of sustainable living and economic practices in society, how to foster world citizenship carried by the spirit of global solidarity, as well as appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development. The imperative is acting together for 2030, with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders, and all peoples. The Covid19 pandemic not only painfully highlighted the ways in which we are globally interconnected and how rapidly events and phenomena on one side of the world can reach and affect the rest but also that we cannot solve global problems through national strategies. Only multilateral coordination and collaboration can bring solutions to global issues we are facing.

In the envisioned collaborative efforts, we need to be aware of the worldviews and narratives that nourish our individual and collective behaviour or human becoming as unconscious and conscious conditions, constraints, and opportunities from a systems point of view. This entails taking the dynamics of embodied subjectivity and intersubjectivity into account given that they are embedded in the enabling structures, sustainability-oriented innovations, multi-level governance, guiding regulations, and empowering metrics that originate from and further cultivate our worldviews.

18.3 The Case for an Enlivening Narrative to Enable Our Co-Evolutionary Pathways

In essence, what we are after are ways of *humaning better*: how can we, individually and as a species, act in dynamic harmony with all of life and the life support systems of Earth? The challenge of addressing this question of how to human better has become both profound and urgent. The practices, dispositions, and values that favor the emergence of an authentic expression of our full potential to human are varied and

multiple—and often ancient. The underlying dimensionality of humaning that holds greatest potential for actionable frameworks that address the SDGs as considered in the Kyoto Manifesto II lies in our potential to harness the power of collective intelligence. As we engage in the process of ushering in the conditions for the emergence of a truly thrivable planet—listening into the systemic nurturance spaces and seeking to identify the systemic leverage points for the emergence of a *glocal* eco-civilization—it will be increasingly important for our species to continue to explore ways of fitting our individual melodies together to create sustaining and enduring harmonies with the broader symphony of life on Earth. This is more than just a nice metaphor: it is the essence of *syntony*. As an organizing force in societal evolution, syntony involves an embodiment and manifestation of conscious evolution: when conscious intention aligns with evolutionary purpose, we can foster and design evolutionarily consonant pathways of human development in partnership with Earth. This goes way beyond merely sustainable development strategies. Indeed, it is the essence of regenerative, thrivable development.

As part of this action inquiry, a fundamental task for the agents of systemic change of today, for tomorrow, is the creation and promotion of relational intelligence applied to systemic innovation. If connective intelligence is the capacity to identify and connect with individuals and resources relevant to humaning for thrivability, and collective intelligence is the ability to foster synergetic initiatives based on such connective intelligence, then relational intelligence is the sense-*ability* required to harness collective intelligence for the greater good. Such evolutionary competence is at the heart of our emerging collective expression of life as Earth. Authoring this narrative involves a collective act of re-*membering* and re-*storying* our interbeing. "[…] There are other stories of self, however. We could see ourselves, as many spiritual traditions do, not as separate beings but as "interbeings," not just interdependent but interexistent" (Eisenstein, 2014). This is the celebration of our deepest sense of being and belonging—of coming home and being home. The emerging narratives of systemic sustainability, of evolutionary syntony, of *glocal thrivability* all draw upon this wellspring of understanding (Wheeler, 2006). Re-membering our community—not as human beings with myopic self-centered interests, but as human becomings who are consciously evolving members of an interdependent web of life—is fast becoming an evolutionary imperative, extending and fostering the imperative of acting together for 2030.

In the collection of essays that comprise the book *Beyond Fear and Rage* (Laszlo, 2017), the need for such hope is recognized. Hope derives from the knowledge that we are all part of patterns that emerge and evolve. Hope lies in the process, in the joy of being a part of a consonant, coherent, connected meta-narrative of life on/in/with Earth. It also derives from the knowledge that we can and always do, whether wittingly or not, affect the harmonics of emergence. So, the question becomes, how do we choose to join, and what patterns of consonance do we help give rise to?

Reclamation, resilience, and regeneration are critically important orientations for our times, but it is through transformation, transmutation, and transcendence that we will emerge the new realities that will takes us out of and beyond these times. Doing

so will require diligence, integrity, and commitment. Even if we are not aware of them, with diligence, integrity, and commitment, they will manifest—just without efforting. It is a consonant alignment of being, a state of syntony, and it is often non-conscious. But we also can create a process of syntony, if we care enough to learn how and when to be empathetic for "all of us" (people, beings, things), and if we stop separating things into atomistic, individualistic compartments. In short, it means reaffirming the sacredness of life—of life as a dynamic process to be maintained and furthered, and not just as a state of being. Humaning affirms our true nature is as Human Becomings, not merely as Human Beings. In his book on *Birth Without Violence,* Frederick Leboyer (1975) evokes the attitude that the sacredness of greeting a new life invites: "Only a little patience and humility. A little silence. Unobtrusive but real attention. Awareness of the newcomer as a person. Unselfconsciousness." And if that is how to engage with a new life coming into this world, then it must also be appropriate for how to engage with all things sacred. When all things are considered sacred—all the time—it evokes an entire worldview.

Learning how to listen, that is the first step toward syntony. In the spirit of the Kyoto Manifesto II, it is what we are called to do in fulfillment of our higher potential, both individually and collectively. Erich Jantsch (1975) suggests that "[…] we are in the process of learning to take seriously those responses which are no longer innate but emerge from tuning in to general evolutionary forces. Syntony is on the verge of becoming more conscious." The act of listening into what Stuart Kauffman (2003) has called the adjacent possible, of curating that which appears as though it were almost seeking to emerge, this is the act of intuiting, imagining, and co-creating a narrative of syntonious thrivability. It is what was so deliciously captured by Arundhati Roy's (2003) evocative assertion: "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." Cultivating this sense-*ability*—and the corresponding response-*ability* that it calls for—is part of the new set of competencies needed for the type of thrivable human presence on Earth at the heart of the Kyoto Manifesto II, to human better. It is both the simplest and most natural thing with many ways in the world, and at the same time requires focus, attention, and above all, practice of awareness. If we learn to ease that part of your consciousness that keeps up the constant chatter in our head, commenting on and judging everything, we start to make ourselves more available to the information flows of syntony, for we are never truly cut off from them. *Quieting the mind*, then *releasing into the moment*, without the need to "do anything" with it, just being fully present, and then *allowing our perceptions to flow* with whatever arises in our field of awareness, this is the practice. These three simple steps may take a lifetime to cultivate. The result is greater flow with what's going on in your life, greater coherence with yourself, with others, with nature, with your ancestors and those who will come after you, and even with other times and places of the cosmos. David Price (2014) writes about the notion of engaging in a *daologue with Earth*, which evokes this exploration of and engagement with the way in which conversation, play, dance, and all aspects of life-as-art connect us to the quintessence of humaning as an expression of the cosmos, itself.

The quality and character of this story of our individual and collective being and becoming, therefore, depends on the way in which we author our life and cultivate our full potential to human throughout the five Syntony Spheres and their respective practices:

1. In the first syntony sphere—*humaning with oneself*; personal or internal syntony—the practice involves centering, quieting the mind, listening with every cell of our being. These practices cultivate intuition, empathy, compassion, insight that matches outsight, and a willingness to explore and follow our deepest calling.
2. In the second syntony sphere—*humaning with others*; community or interpersonal syntony—the practice involves deep dialogue and collaboration. Coming together to learn with and from each other and to engage in coordinated action with considerateness, openness, and joy in order to enable collective wisdom.
3. In the third syntony sphere—*humaning with nature*; ecosystemic or transspecies syntony—the practice involves communing; listening to the messages of all beings (whether they be waterfalls, animals, mountains or galaxies) and acknowledging our interdependence and ultimate unity.
4. In the fourth syntony sphere—*humaning with ancestors and future generations*; evolutionary or integral syntony—the practice involves listening to the voices of those who have come long before us and prepared the ground for our own being in the here and now. Simultaneously, it involves sensing into future generations and what kind of history would best serve them for us to create in the here and now. These practices cultivate our ability to flow with the process of being and becoming that gives direction, dimension, and meaning to our life.
5. In the fifth syntony sphere—*humaning with the deep dimension of the cosmos*; pan-cosmic or holistic syntony—the practice involves learning to read the patterns of change of which we are a part; learning to hear the rhythms of life that emanate from the deepest dimension of the cosmos, and becoming familiar with the improvisational jam session that nature has been playing since time immemorial. These practices cultivate our ability to play our own piece; to sing and dance our own path into existence in harmony with the grand patterns of cosmic creation, and to participate in the ongoing flourishing of life.

Full syntony occurs when all five Syntony Spheres become harmonically aligned in daily practice, resulting in an integral engagement with the syntony-carrying information flows that continually manifest the universe. In order to use syntony to human better, we have to learn certain skills, to develop and practice certain competencies, and to manifest a willingness to think and act interactively. The notion of "will"—of active intention and passionate purpose—is crucial here. In fact, it is what makes the difference between merely seeking harmony and consciously curating a constantly emerging dynamic of syntony. When we approach the issues of humaning from the standpoint—or rather, the flowpoint—of syntony, the aim is not for either "the best way" or "the right way," and not even for "the most convenient or gratifying way," but rather for the ways (any of many) that will lead to the greatest potential for conviviality while assuring the continual maintenance of an increasingly

robust and supportive environment. When we really open ourselves to the deeper flow of syntony-informed humaning, we realize that there is no stage in an evolutionary process that does not take every previous stage into account. Biologists have expressed this with the dictum "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." Even seemingly drastic changes—the evolutionary leaps that are described in Gould and Eldridge's theory of punctuated equilibrium (1972), for instance—can be seen to "make sense" when viewed as part of a broader continuum of change. But they only make sense in hindsight: evolutionary change is not predictable, and yet it is coherent and consistent with all with which it is interconnected—in terms of both phenomena and processes. This is the deeper pattern of syntony.

What would it be like if we were to "play by rule of syntony" as we sought to address the Sustainable Development Goals in the framework of circular economies as put forth by the Kyoto Manifesto II? The virtuous cycle of interdependence would call us to "see" "hear" "sense" (Laszlo, 2015) the changes that are happening in the world around us, as well as to pay attention to the ways in which the individuals and groups with which we interact perceive these changes. We would need to cultivate our evolutionary vision for change in our world—and we would need to be able to communicate our sense-*abilities* more interactively, including all those aspects of life and living that involve a sense of joy, love, awe, the sacred and the celebratory experiences of life. If we can realize these universal and transformational ambitions across the full extent of the Agenda for 2030, the lives of all stand to be profoundly improved and our world will be transformed for the better. We are the generation that can create the future we will live in—so let us start today!

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