

The Great Transition: Journey of an Idea

Paul Raskin

The jury is still out on whether the Great Transition Initiative's hoped-for Great Transition will be realized; its achievement rests on the emergence of a planetary movement of concerned citizens buoyed by the conviction that together they can change the world.

Sustainability's call for a more just and enduring mode of development, framed as an abstract goal, finds broad adherence. When it comes to specifying targets and paths for reaching them, however, consensus dissolves. Since the concept of sustainable development entered the policy discourse, views on its implications for reshaping society have divided broadly into two distinct approaches: reform and transformation. One-quarter of a century later, as portentous crises roil and assault nature, societies and psyches, the strategic debate grows ever more urgent.

The reform strategy aims to alter unsustainable trends through market adjustments and policy measures that hasten the deployment of green technology and poverty alleviation. Critics of this mainstream approach, while acknowledging that such actions are necessary, fear that a program of incremental change—treating symptoms instead of the underlying disease—will prove insufficient to address the complexity and scale of the task. The long road to a resilient and fair economic system requires a globally coordinated effort in order to overcome such powerful countervailing forces as the growth imperative of conventional development, the resistance of vested interests and a spreading consumerist culture. Noting that the necessary political will has been nowhere in sight, proponents of a transformational strategy advocate deeper cultural shifts—a new sustainability paradigm to drive and guide development.

Prompted by these concerns, Gilberto Gallopín, visionary ecologist (and former scientist at the International Institute for Sustainable Development) and I convened the Global Scenario Group (GSG) in 1995. This international and interdisciplinary body embarked on a multiyear journey of illuminating the requirements for a transition to sustainability.¹ We asked: What environmental and social targets define the boundaries for a sustainable future? What critical uncertainties lie ahead and how might they be resolved? What contrasting pathways might world development take?

In adopting the scenario approach, the GSG recognized that the uncertainties inherent in complex systems and human choice rendered prediction futile. More humbly, scenarios tell contrasting stories in words, images and numbers of how events might unfold. Their aim is to scan possibilities and stimulate the imagination, highlighting dangers and opportunities in the future's terrain in order to broaden awareness and guide present-day action.

The GSG organized its scenarios into three broad types—evolution, decline and transformation—and referred to these as Conventional Worlds, Barbarization and Great Transitions. The Conventional Worlds scenario assumes the structural continuity of global development and persistence of its dominant drivers. Great Transitions portrays paths where, in pursuit of sustainability, institutions and values change fundamentally. In Barbarization scenarios, both reform and transformation fail and civilized norms and institutions sharply degrade. The Group developed narratives for a range of variations, complementing qualitative analysis with quantitative simulation of changing social, economic and environmental patterns.²

The GSG summarized its insights in the valedictory essay, “Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead.”³ The overarching premise is that we have entered the Planetary Phase of Civilization. The deepening strands of transnational interdependence—trade and finance, communications and culture, conflict and immigration, and climate change and environmental disruption—are manifestations of an ongoing holistic shift to an integrated global system. Some globalized form of society will emerge from the turbulent period of transition now underway, but its ultimate shape remains uncertain and contested.

The world faces the disquieting and unclear prospects of the Planetary Phase still hobbled by outmoded institutions from the Industrial Era. In the disjuncture between a fading order and accelerating challenges, the danger looms of socioecological stresses outpacing Conventional Worlds adaptations and thereby gathering into a systemic global crisis pushing development toward Barbarization. That tendency might take the form of an authoritarian ‘Fortress World,’ a kind of global apartheid of elites in privileged enclaves and an outside, impoverished majority more and more restive.

Great Transitions offers both a more secure pathway to sustainability (‘the push of necessity’) and an attractive social vision (‘the pull of desire’). Its scenarios draw attention to levers for changing the course of development, such as building transboundary institutions, nurturing value shifts and encouraging less material lifestyles that transcend the reform repertoire of Conventional Worlds. Beyond such instrumental considerations, rigorous visions of how an organic planetary civilization might emerge from the perils of our historical moment inspire hope and action.

The possibility of a Great Transition is rooted in the very predicament of the Planetary Phase, namely, the deepening interdependencies that bind people and the Earth as a single community of fate. This unprecedented historic condition nourishes a



Europe



Africa



Latin America and the Caribbean



Asia and the Pacific



The Arab States



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corresponding enlargement of consciousness: awareness of humanity's place in the larger community of life, a nascent sense of global citizenship and our responsibility for the well-being of future generations. In a Great Transition, a new suite of values—human solidarity, quality of life and ecological resilience—displace the prevailing triad of individualism, consumerism and domination of nature. This profound cultural shift would lay the foundation for democratic forms of global governance for matters transcending the scope of disputatious state-centric political orders. The new paradigm would make the well-being of people and nature (not GDP growth) the priority and would welcome multiple cultural and political paths to that end (not the conventional model of unidirectional development, in which consumption and production patterns of poor nations converge toward those of the rich).

Which social actors would be central characters in the drama of transition? The myopia, self-interest and fragmentation of the players now dominating the global stage—intergovernmental organizations, transnational corporations and international civil society—weaken these creatures of the fading era, leaving them with constricted roles. Meanwhile, the prime agent for a Great Transition mills, restless, in the wings: an aware, engaged world citizenry. The quality of future life correlates with our capacity and commitment to nurture a vast and coherent movement of global citizens that can take centre stage.

Thus, with the analysis complete and the central task clarified, the time came to move from ideas to ideas in action. Therefore, in 2003, the GSG segued into the Great Transition Initiative (GTI), a growing network of hundreds of engaged thinkers and thinking activists.⁴ GTI serves as a platform for updating and enriching Great Transition scenarios, sharpening the theory of change and spreading awareness.

Recently, GTI joined kindred organizations [including *Kosmos Journal*] in an expanding alliance we call The Widening Circle (TWC), a campaign to advance the global citizens movement.⁵ TWC aims to offer a vital new mode of engagement for countless people the world over who are eager to be engaged in an initiative equal to the planetary challenge. The next phase of TWC will be launched at a global assembly held in Rio at the time of the 2012 Earth Summit. To all who share its aspiration, TWC will stand as an open invitation to step into the circle and join in spreading ripples of change.

The world today is a baffling mixture of contradictory tendencies: the tenacious momentum of Conventional Worlds, the pushback of Barbarization and the nascent impulse for a Great Transition. The quality of future life rests on the emergence of a planetary movement of concerned citizens buoyed by the conviction that together they can change the world. The extent of this rising will measure the prospects for a transition to a worthy future. The journey continues.

¹ GSG served as the 'scenario working group' for the first Global Environmental Outlook. ² The PoleStar System, a flexible simulation framework and vast database, was created for this purpose; see www.polestarproject.org. ³ Available at <http://tellus.org/documents>. ⁴ See <http://www.GTInitiative.org>. ⁵ See P. Raskin, "Imagine All the People: Advancing a Global Citizens Movement," *Kosmos* spring, summer 2011. www.kosmosjournal.org

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Paul Raskin is President of the Tellus Institute, an interdisciplinary not-for-profit research and policy organization specializing in resource and environmental strategies for sustainable development. He is also the Director of the Global Transition Initiative coordinated by Tellus.