CREATING THE FUTURE

Five principles of realistic hope

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We humans live in an era of globally connected challenges and existential crises when many people look at the future with fear and hopelessness. Avoiding a climate change catastrophe seems an especially urgent and impossible challenge—how can we move from an energy system transition to an energy-system transformation quickly enough? How can we build a better future for those now living in energy poverty while at the same time nurturing a healthy planet?

Although human beings spend a lot of their mental time thinking about the future, we seldom consider how we think about the future—the nature of futures thinking itself. Yet the future is always and only a fiction, and the future we imagine shapes our understanding of reality. If we imagine that better futures are possible, we make different decisions in the present.

Several years ago, we asked experts in various fields whether there was realistic hope to solve global challenges in water, energy, food, and other areas—and if so, how. What were the links between thinking about the future and acting effectively? We gathered their responses into a book, Realistic hope: facing global challenges (2018), and then asked ourselves, “What have we learned?”

Of course, our authors had offered insightful analyses of specific problems and illuminating examples of solutions to these problems. But we wondered whether, in addition to these specific insights, we had discovered any general principles of realistic hope. What is necessary to build better futures? What is realistic hope based on?

In summary, we saw five interconnected principles that seemed to be important for creating better futures: diversity, dialogue, experimentation, systems thinking, and futures framing.

Diversity has to do with the power of who’s in the room; dialogue describes how they interact with each other; experimentation is what they do; systems thinking is the context in which they approach problems and solutions; and futures framing relates to the purpose of creating a future together that’s different from the past.

What follows is an overview of each of these principles using the challenge of climate change as an illustrative example of how these principles might be applied in practice. We’ve chosen climate change as our example because it poses an especially difficult challenge involving societal disruption and transformation and requiring new forms of innovation and cooperation.
Creating the future

Diversity

Energy systems and social systems have coevolved over thousands of years of human history. The technology we develop to capture and use energy shapes our values, social norms, and how we structure our societies; and in turn, our social relations can accelerate or constrain the development of energy technology. Innovation can occur in either the technological or the social sphere and sometimes requires synchronized changes in both. But history matters—we can suffer from path dependence and lock-in on both the technological and social fronts.

Incremental improvement from a familiar and accepted starting point can be relatively fast because it relies on quick and easy consensus. But transformation requires moving beyond familiar solutions. And this means we must explore more options. Optionality is the key to avoiding lock-in—a situation in which successful organizations using habitual perspectives and routine practices become overwhelmed by wider changes beyond their control.

Welcoming diversity and embracing difference lead to the emergence of more options. Sometimes our digital connectivity lulls us into thinking we are including diverse perspectives just because a project might involve a large number of participants. But we often choose to connect with people like us who think the way we do. Or we focus on one part of the system, such as energy supply, and ignore other parts of the system, such as consumer behavior change.

Diversity requires us to be alert to different ways of knowing and learning, not just from disciplinary experts in our own culture but also from experiments in other parts of the globe. The richest societies or most highly industrialized nations don’t always have the answers. Multiple pathways toward lowering emissions are emerging in different parts of the world, from carbon capture and storage in some to microgrids in others. Including these diverse perspectives is not a task of melding difference into one undifferentiated whole but of rendering and working with a number of genuinely different yet logical perspectives on any messy, connected challenge.

Meeting the global challenge of climate change requires taking into account a diversity of needs as well as strategies. We need a healthy planet; but millions of people also need access to the energy necessary to live a better life, even if that means that different geographies adopt climate change solutions at different paces. Richer nations may need to do more while poorer nations catch up. Even so, OECD countries can’t export their particular solutions and expect them to work in other contexts. No one size fits all. And some strategies, such as regenerative agriculture—restoring biodegraded soil to improve land health—require more energy in the short term to achieve long-term climate goals.

There is no single technical “solution” to the challenge of climate change—rather, a diversity of responses that, together, can lead to a transformation.

Dialogue

Often, when diversity is represented, it is not activated because, for reasons of protocol, hierarchy, or habit, dialogue doesn’t happen. Representatives of different perspectives read papers to each other or listen to presentations from experts. Information flows in one direction, usually from the top down, and so learning is limited to what is received, only some of which may be relevant or even understood.

True dialogue requires forms of open listening in which the point is not to convince the other of one’s point of view but to be attuned to solutions that might arise in the moment. That requires being fully present and open, not simply listening for the opportunity to make a winning argument. In dialogue, participants create space for something new to emerge,
even if what emerges is not yet fully formed. A meeting of diverse people that produces an outcome that would have been produced even if the group had not been diverse is unlikely to have involved true dialogue.

Even with these challenges to dialogue, it’s striking that so many of the sources of hope that we see arise from what diverse people and groups are doing together. While we need high-level leadership to offer perspectives on the bigger picture, especially in meeting challenges like climate change, new solutions are coming bottom up from a more diverse mix of state and non-state actors, including cities, NGOs, and other groups.

Global energy transition is ultimately about changing our relationship with each other as well as with energy. The way we relate to energy is closely intertwined with the way we relate to each other. The global shift from fossil fuels to renewable power is also a shift in underlying societal power structures.

None of the socially complex, connected challenges we face can be solved by any one person, community, company, or country working alone. The search for solutions requires collaboration among diverse groups of actors with different interests and needs. This is especially true for the post-pandemic context in which issues of social justice and structural inequalities have become more visible. Enabling an energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables involves integration not just of technologies but of users’ priorities and behaviors.

Collaborative dialogues have to use various vocabularies as well and not just the techno-economic vocabulary the energy industry uses, which can be impenetrable to outsiders. On the other hand, in order to make these dialogues meaningful, ordinary citizens have to be better educated as to where their energy comes from and at what level behavior change needs to be supported—individually, at the city level, at the national level, and internationally.

Many parts of the world have experienced a clash of underlying worldviews. In the arena of facing climate change, these clashes often take the form of “narrow green” versus “pragmatic, clean, and affordable.” Sustainable development used to be about doing more with less, but now it’s less about gradual improvement and more about learning various ways to speed up the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables. This is a much more complex undertaking, in part because it requires such a high degree of cooperation involving many-to-many rather than simply one-to-many interactions and finding common ground among diverse points of view.

Flexible cooperation is catalyzed by the quality of strategic conversation. Effective diverse stakeholder dialogues require a safe space for conflict to enable constructive engagement with uncertainty and for disagreement to become a learning asset. A good quality strategic conversation directs attention not just to what others are saying but also to the common ground from which a new, shared future can emerge.

Using dialogue as a form of interactive, social learning enables complex and connected challenges to be seen and reseen from a diversity of perspectives, leading to a deeper understanding of the underlying situation. It provides a platform for discovering new insights, generating new solutions, and catalyzing the flexible collaboration necessary to solve seemingly intractable problems.

**Experimentation**

The energy industry used to talk about peak demand—but perhaps, in an era of the need for an energy transition that is unprecedented in both speed and scale, we should speak of “peak incrementalism." We don’t have the luxury of building an ideal design for a one-and-done solution to the climate crisis. We have to make change happen now in many different, ongoing, flexibly coordinated experiments. In this context, continual learning is absolutely
necessary, and uncertainty is a source of hope—a friend, not a foe because it reminds us of the possibilities to shape the unpredictable future.

But uncertainty in the face of large global problems must not be a barrier to action. As in the case of climate change, there is no time to wait until we know the future for sure. We must engage with uncertainty in order to act. And we must act in the spirit of experimentation, with a willingness to observe results, accept and learn from failures, and change.

Even collaboration itself must be open to experimentation, with new forms of social organization and the creation of temporary, platform-based groups and robust public-private partnerships including people at all levels of society.

At the moment, our ability to learn from experimentation is significantly hindered by the lack of access to data about energy usage and consumer behavior at every level. Rather than being in the public domain, this information exists behind paywalls and, for the most part, is not available to help individuals either singly or together to make informed decisions. To take just a few examples: the size of the carbon footprint for electricity depends upon the fuel that was used to create it; a city may seem to be “clean” because its energy use is “hidden”—embedded in the goods or services manufactured elsewhere; and hydrogen may be relatively clean or dirty, depending on how it was produced. It’s difficult to experiment with demand-driven solutions, for example, without access to the demand data.

There is enormous potential in using data to design diverse experiments for responding to the climate challenge—and then collecting and disseminating data from these experiments to learn and redesign the next cycle of experimentation. We have to experiment and learn not just from new technologies and financing but also from behaviors, norms, values, and choices—the human dimension of responding to climate change.

**Systems thinking**

For centuries, our most successful approach to problems has been incremental and mechanistic: take apart the whole, divide it into manageable smaller pieces, and solve in relation to each piece. But this approach does not work in dealing with the complex, multi-faceted, and connected challenges we are now facing.

Flexible and holistic thinking is essential. Every large, global challenge is embedded within a living system—a complex, adaptive, dynamic whole in which many different parts interact and coevolve. That means that while we must act with experimental openness and humility, we must also take care to avoid forced and premature consensus. Systems thinking helps us to clarify a more effective place—or places—to start to intervene in the current situation but does not claim full knowledge of the whole system or its future. There is no single, right perspective since all perspectives are developed from a specific situation in the system.

The scale and complexity of climate change require three distinct kinds of systems thinking. The first, which is typically top-down and technocratic, involves interpreting modeling systems and drawing diagrams of flows, connections, and feedback loops.

The second kind of systems thinking, sometimes called “soft” systems thinking, or simply “systemic thinking,” involves collaborative meaning making and calls for making subjective worldviews and assumptions visible (Checkland & Poulter, 2008). This form of systems thinking is often used in management or organizational change contexts, especially when many diverse points of view need to be taken into account.

The third kind of systems thinking is especially relevant to the social and political aspects of the climate change crisis. It is sometimes called “critical systems thinking” in that it brings issues of power more explicitly into focus and highlights how constructing different boundaries
around issues fundamentally changes how we see both those issues and the system as a whole (Jackson, 2019). A clean and just energy transition requires critical systems thinking in order to understand the complex interactions of government, private enterprise, and energy consumers in their roles as voters, workers, citizens, and customers.

To address any complex global challenge, we must work not only with an awareness of the relation of parts to each other and of parts to the whole but also with humility in relation to our ignorance of the whole. Relationship is a key dynamic because, at the most fundamental level, every living system is interrelated.

Leading holistically within and across living systems is not the same as exercising authority over a hierarchy. At present, there is no such thing as global society or global government. Neither may ever materialize. In this world of messy, connected challenges, we need to avoid prescriptive and detailed top-down blueprints that focus on one part or claim full knowledge of the whole. Instead, we can achieve shared goals through iterative, action-learning processes that remain alert to the evolving big-picture and include opportunities to rehearse new solutions using technology to create immersive storytelling.

**Futures framing**

As systems thinking makes clear, the future is neither empty nor neutral. Whether or not they are made explicit, assumptions about the future are always shaping our understanding of the present. Most of these assumptions about what the future will be like are constructed by projecting what is happening in the present forward into the future. Such a projected future “feels” like reality even though the future is always and only a fiction.

The fictional nature of the future leads to a key insight: while we cannot predict or control the future, we can imagine it. Better yet, rather than imagining “it”—as if at any given time, there was only one possible future—we can imagine multiple futures. Imagining multiple futures encourages us not to fall into the trap of selecting one future and acting as if that imagined future were a reality rather than a fiction.

One way of imagining multiple futures is the process of collaborative scenario building (Kahane, 2012; Ramirez & Wilkinson, 2016).

The word “scenario” is used for many different things. Sometimes it’s used for a desired future end-state—a vision. Often, especially in government settings, it’s used for a model-based projection—a forecast. When used in this context, multiple scenarios are generated through slight tweaking of the model to give different outcomes along the same trajectory. But we use “scenarios” to mean different imagined futures that may arise from unexpected swerves in forecasts and that include both good and bad events.

Collaborative scenarios come in sets of usually two to four stories of alternative, equally plausible futures designed to offer a platform for dialogue and learning (Wilkinson, 2017). Because scenarios are about what might happen rather than what should happen, they lead us into the practice of saying not why something can’t happen but how something could happen. Scenario building enables deeply held assumptions about the future to be made explicit through the process of storytelling.

The world is in the midst of a contested paradigm shift, from a dominant story frame of the economic myth (and its ideal of growth and efficiency) to new conceptions of well-being which are rooted in an emerging ecological myth and its ideal of the interconnected health of individuals, societies, and the planet (Flowers, 2013). The key actors in shaping these new futures are dreamers, experimenters, builders, and connectors. But now, there is a new urgency for these actors to work together to embed this new paradigm of value into our current systems.
Creating the future

of government, business, and consumers. We have to engage new ways of thinking of human progress that are different from the old growth model originating in the west that we’ve all been living under (although with varied and inequitable impacts based on global position).

In many cases, it’s not that solutions for climate change are not available; it’s that the systems that embody our priorities are organized around economic values rather than the good of people or the planet. It’s as if we have to rebuild the engine of a jet while it’s in flight in a way that won’t endanger the lives of the passengers.

The most effective scenario-building processes include the other four principles of realistic hope: diversity of participants; deep dialogue, including understanding the issue from multiple points of view; experimentation through rapid prototyping of different solutions and stories of the future; and systems thinking, not only about the issues being explored but also in terms of the system within which scenario participants are operating. Every part of the system needs to be part of the futures exploration. This is particularly important in that most of the energy scenarios in the past have been built by and for energy suppliers and not energy consumers and as tools for thinking rather than cocreation.

We can’t think a better future into existence, but through learning with various alternative futures and reflecting on what better futures might be, we avoid the risk of overlooking important choices (Wilkinson & Eidinow, 2008). In an era of big data, we can use virtual reality to enable learning experiences around better futures, and we can use gaming to explore the implications of individual actions in relation to the emergent behavior of the whole system. In itself, futures thinking can nurture realistic hope—but only if we move from this process of disciplined imagination to action.

Principles of realistic hope

Realistic hope is open to diversity—it doesn’t assume that all the answers will come from a single perspective or in one go. No single story of our energy past, present, or future is enough to address the climate change emergency, and the emphasis on one story brings a risk of more extreme polarization, unproductive conflict, and even a threat to global peace.

Realistic hope arises from deep listening, social learning, and collaborative leadership and from engaging with uncertainty as an opportunity for experimentation. It acknowledges failure in order to learn from it. It recognizes we are each part of a whole, not the main or only one. And it doesn’t assume the future will be like the past.

Realistic hope also arises from developing new roots in systemic leadership approaches that involve all levels of society in sharing diverse stories about energy for people and the planet and that offer new and generative models of human and economic development.

These principles, which we see emerging more and more, are sources of realistic hope. We need to use these principles in a spirit that is positive, humble, action-oriented, and persistent.

Why positive?—because imagining and creating a better future together is energizing, whereas hopelessness is paralyzing. We also need to remain humble in order to learn. At the same time, we must recognize the need to act in order to create new and different future possibilities. And as the examples we have explored show, the significant challenges facing us all cannot be solved quickly or easily—we have to be persistent.

Note

1 These five principles were originally introduced in the conclusion of Wilkinson & Flowers (2018, pp. 59–62).
References


