

NAVIGATING THE
UNIMAGINABLE PAPER 1



THE FUTURES WE FACE

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INTRODUCTION



Now's the time to choose. The future of humanity depends on how we act at this point. It is the choice between extinction and survival, between a dystopian future and a world of thriving life. It's all, literally, in our hands. Right now.

If you feel ready to face into these choices, read on. There is much to consider. Once you start on this journey there is no going back.

There is a future that's waiting to happen. It's not so hard to imagine. It arises from the more generous corners of human nature and is tempered by an understanding of how to limit our more excessive tendencies. Best of all, every aspect of it has already been seeded in our world today. As we show in Paper 5 there are many examples across the world where the future is being shaped by regenerative practices. As the saying goes, the future is here – it's just not yet evenly distributed.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Imagine a world where everything about life, work and society is healthy and based on promoting wellbeing - not just for people but for all life. It's not so far in the future, say thirty years from now, in the 2050s. We all have a better work-life balance, four days' work, at six hours per day. Then three days to enjoy the company of friends and family, spending time in the countryside, at the beach, in the mountains.

The streets are much less busy, maybe town centres are pedestrianised; there is frequent, integrated public transport. Food is fresh, chemical free, plant-based, with just enough meat or fish for those that want it. And all this is powered by 100% renewable energy, so the air is clean and clear - partly also because neighbourhoods are greener, with more trees, more plants, more open spaces.

The way we interact has changed somehow too. With the stress of work and the city reduced, people say hello on the subway, talk in the streets, chat at the check-out or while waiting for the bus. It starts at school, where kids learn to get along, to understand themselves, their moods, their needs. And they're taught to meditate from a young age. They are encouraged to embrace the importance of a life of meaning, community, authenticity, perhaps even a life of service.

This continues throughout life, our learning journey. The lines are blurred between work, learning, education. All are focussed on our ongoing growth and development, helping each of us to reach our fullest potential in whatever way we feel is right.

At work we organise in ways that value meaning and being able to do our best work - usually in teams and circles. People have a real say in their working lives and in the decisions of their organisations. These organisations are founded on strong values and principles - care for people, care for the Earth, giving all stakeholders a voice. They are without exception organisations with a social purpose, operating beyond the profit motive to help regenerate local and global ecosystems. The economy is orientated not to profit but to wellbeing.

Land, housing, workplaces are held in common, stewarded and governed by those who use them, in the knowledge that they are acting as temporary guardians on behalf of future generations. Unequal and exploitative ownership patterns, born out of colonialism and private property, have been swept aside. This allows fair exchange between communities and peoples coming together as equals for mutual benefit.

The politics of confrontation and polarisation are replaced by a series of nested circles that enable decisions to be made by those they impact upon most. Issues and challenges are surfaced, conflicts worked through and learnt from to build consensus for change. Short-term electoral gain, party divisions and vested interests are replaced by deep democracy: decision-making in council. Decisions rest with and are decided at the most local level possible, by those they affect most.

The overriding goal of the new politics is to make decisions by considering generations to come, the needs of the Planet and the health of all beings. The process seeks to understand and acknowledge the full breadth of perspectives, valuing diversity of opinion, before moving towards consensus or consent. It's not about "winning" the argument. It's about making sound long-term decisions that everyone can live with.

All of this can be created now. We have all the social and material technologies we need to make a positive future happen. There is enough food, enough energy, enough space for everyone to have a fulfilling and healthy life - provided it is more evenly distributed.



ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

But it seems we have set our course towards a very different future. One that risks the collapse of civilisation as we know it. And possibly even the extinction of humanity as a species.

The current global crisis seems destined to climax between now and the decade of the 2040s, as the climate emergency really starts to bite, combined with an increase in social unrest as the economy and politics continue to polarise. What follows is not a fictional apocalyptic scenario but one based on research and real-world scenario-planning.

Food systems are the first to be impacted because of the intricate relationship between crop yields and weather patterns. As global temperature rises pass two degrees, the corn crop in the US is devastated, falling to half its former levels. The same happens to the sorghum crop that feeds half a billion people across Africa, Central America and South Asia.

As a result, food prices quadruple, inflation goes through the roof, there are supermarket queues across the world and riots over what little food becomes available.

Simultaneously, millions of people are forced to leave their homes as sea levels rise, threatening cities like Shanghai, Hong Kong, Osaka, Miami and The Hague. In total over 275 million are affected in all parts of the globe. Some estimates suggest this increases to 800 million people displaced by 2050.

The impact is devastating. World population peaks and then begins to plummet due to famine and disease. From a height of over 8 billion, it falls to around 2 billion over just forty years. Millions upon millions of people die in these four decades from starvation, childhood diseases, mass outbreaks of contagious diseases and the spread of antibiotic resistant strains of illness. Systems cannot cope with all the dead bodies, fuelling the spread of infection.



Energy production and distribution begins to fall apart. The world's nuclear power stations, nearly all built on the coast, are flooded, shut down or overheat. There are multiple meltdowns pouring radioactive material into the sea on a scale that dwarfs Fukushima. This results in the mass death of marine mammals, a dramatic collapse of fish and seafood as a source of protein and the spread of cancers.

The expansion of renewable energy cannot keep pace with the doubling of overall energy demand; there is just not enough of the rare earth minerals needed. Minerals essential for producing both solar panels and batteries for cars and electricity storage are gobbled up in ever increasing amounts, until the mines are empty. Demand for silver, zinc, copper, and lead increase three-fold. The requirement for 130 new silver mega-mines is impossible to meet. Demand for lithium, the key component in batteries, reaches ten times current levels and stocks dwindle away over a decade. Energy is rationed across the globe, causing industry and commerce to collapse. The internet, which has grown to use a quarter of all world electricity, is forced to shrink drastically.

The rule of law begins to crumble as food, energy and other essential resources begin to run out. Large numbers of people head for the far North - Siberia, Northern Canada, Greenland. The lawlessness and chaos of the American gold rush looks like a walk in the park. Wars are threatened over water, land, oil, rare earth minerals. Large foreign land owners, corporate or individual are chased off the land or have to abandon it because it is no longer productive.

Monsoons rage for longer and heavier periods. The Sahara spreads steadily northwards, eventually taking over the Mediterranean region as a whole. Australia tries to migrate to Tasmania. Patagonia is swamped with Latin Americans heading away from the lifeless savannah that was once the Amazon.

Confidence leaves the financial markets. After a rampant boom in property and minerals in Siberia and the Arctic, profits nose-dive. Shares topple, and stock markets head into free fall. Unable to pay their mounting debts for education, healthcare and housing, large numbers of ordinary folk are forced into defaulting. Once-great institutions collapse in swathes, causing further financial chaos.

Companies fail, stock-markets crash and with them insurance and pensions evaporate. There is a financial crash that has no way out. Unemployment rockets, inflation spirals upwards and the debt and credit bubble bursts causing bank failures.

Those out of work, the unemployed, disabled and pensioners are destitute as tax incomes collapse, the welfare state crumbles and their pensions become unpayable. Cities are left in ruins, abandoned as people head for the land or towards the Poles. Civilisation as we know it falls apart.



• PANDEMIC – THE CANARY IN THE COAL MINE

To this scenario we can now add another layer – that of the global pandemic. Many historians have noted the inter-relationship between disease and civilisation collapse. Pandemics may not bring a civilisation to its knees but they can certainly weaken it. They often accompany the period where an empire reaches its outer limits and then heads into decline.

As trade expands ever-outwards to satisfy the desires of those at the core of empire, diseases spread back along trade routes to populations that have no immunity to them. At the same time, rising consumption pushes agriculture into less hospitable terrains where diseases are rife.

So it was that the fall of the Roman Empire was accompanied by not one but three pandemics.

Corona Virus has demonstrated how quickly a new disease can spread across the globe. Our patterns of mass transit, rapid long haul travel and crowded cities make the spread of disease more likely now than ever. And it is arguably our continued encroachment upon wild spaces that brings new diseases to human settlements. Estimates suggest that up to 70% of new diseases have crossed over to humans from wild animals and that destruction of natural habitats is driving this process.



In a chillingly prophetic assessment, the US Director of National Intelligence, noted pandemics as one of the leading potential threats to both national and international security:

We assess that the United States and the world will remain vulnerable to the next flu pandemic or large-scale outbreak of a contagious disease that could lead to massive rates of death and disability, severely affect the world economy, strain international resources, and increase calls on the United States for support.

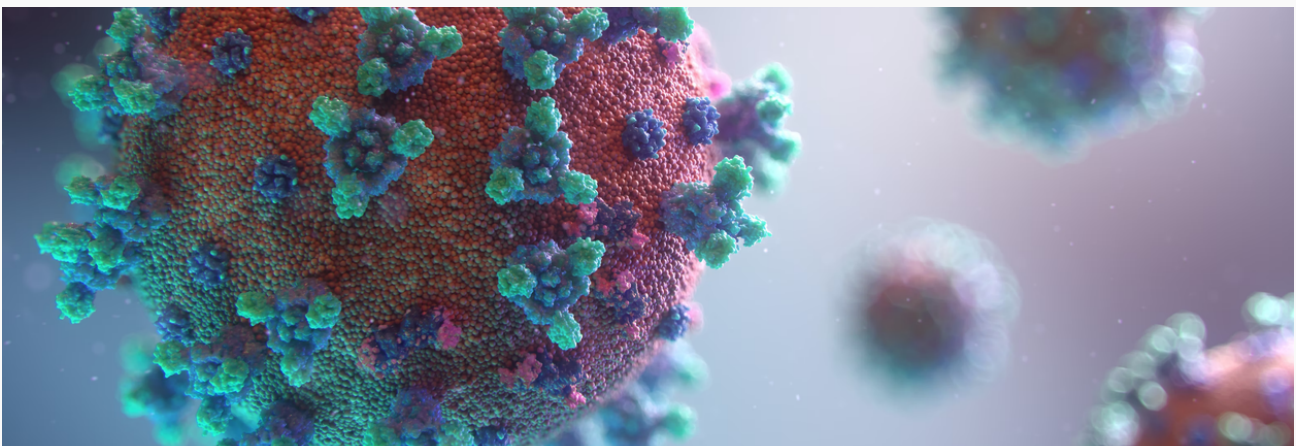
Internationally, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, backed by the World Health Organisation has noted:

Disease amplifiers, including population growth and resulting strains on the environment, climate change, dense urbanization, exponential increases in international travel and migration, both forced and voluntary, increase the risk for everyone, everywhere.

They note the spread of over 1,400 epidemic events in an eight year period, spanning 172 countries. While globalised systems increase risk for us all, it is always, the poor and marginalised who are most likely to feel the full weight:

Outbreaks hit lower-resourced communities much harder given their lack of access to basic health services, clean water and sanitation; this will aggravate the spread of any infectious pathogen.... Negative impacts are particularly profound in fragile and vulnerable settings, where poverty, poor governance, weak health systems, lack of trust in health services, specific cultural and religious aspects and sometimes ongoing armed conflict greatly complicate outbreak preparedness and response.

During COVID the robustness of our collective health and social systems allowed us to mitigate the worst effects of the disease. While loss of life was significant (around a million at the time of going to press), it was much less than many computer models predicted. One assessment suggested that the lockdown measures put in place saved an estimated 3 million lives.





RESPONDING TO CRISIS

We saw during the Corona Virus pandemic the vastly differing responses that are possible. This gave us a glimpse into our preparedness for a much bigger more systemic crisis. So what have we learnt from COVID that might help us prepare for the nightmare scenario described above?

Perhaps there is no real prior experience for what we are heading into. Collapse at a global level, of the systems that support human life everywhere, has never happened before. Yet, there is plenty of learning from history and from more localised crises.

During COVID, countries that tried to carry on as if nothing was happening, were hardest hit. Those who had learnt from prior experience (especially the SARS-I outbreak) were better able to adjust. If we are able to learn from and harness this past experience perhaps we may be able to prepare at least in part for what's about to come.

THE WORLD AT A CROSSROADS

So we face a choice. The momentum of the current system is taking us towards increasing uncertainty, chaos and collapse. We are on the proverbial oil tanker, a vessel that is almost impossible to turn or slow with the dynamism that's needed. Adaptation is beginning to look inevitable.

But how we adapt is still up for grabs. We have choices. One scenario sees each nation protecting its own. Borders are closed, resources are hoarded, order imposed if necessary by emergency measures. Surveillance, control, even Marshall Law are used in an attempt to ensure survival. Authoritarian leaders appeal to people's concerns and fears for the future.

Or, faced with uncertainty we can choose trust, even love. We can open instead of close. We can self-organise and band together, working in community, sharing what's available. Which path we choose will have implications not just for the nature of the coming transition but also for our prospects of survival as a human species.

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If we continue on our current path, we will face the collapse of everything that gives us our security: food production, access to fresh water, habitable ambient temperature and ocean food chains. And if the natural world can no longer support the most basic of our needs then much of the rest of civilisation will quickly break down

Sir David Attenborough speaking to the UN Security Council, 23 February 2021.

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