

The wave theory

Environmentalists waste effort and opportunity by not pulling together. A unified movement will create, inspire and sweep all before it, argues **Miguel Mendonça**

During my global travels, spreading the word on the cheapest, most effective and equitable policy road for renewables, my observations and experiences have led me to several infuriating and distressing conclusions. It seems the movement is suffering from an overall lack of strategic, joined-up, big-picture thinking, and is failing to bring the public on board, and so create a more effective political force for positive change. I believe we are greatly in need of a reality check.

My main contention is that the world's efforts towards sustainability and climate-change mitigation are never going to be effective enough overall to get us where we need to go in time. This is due, in part, to a real lack of oversight, cooperation and coordination, leading to slow progress, festering doubt in the public mind, duplication of effort and the wasting of very limited time, money and human resources.

For example, there are many websites and initiatives aimed at knowledge-sharing on policies and practices, but they are not talking to each other. Why not get this coordinated, and at the very least keep each other informed? Researching initiatives on different areas of sustainability takes too long at the moment – why is there not a good web tool for tracking what people are up to? It is not unreasonable to have at least one or two people in the world who make it their job to create a web portal for finding out what is happening around the world on different parts of the problem, i.e. food, water, biosphere restoration, biodiversity, energy, peace, democracy, trade, economics, human rights and so on. Big players with the reach and clout of the UN Environment Programme and Google should already be thinking this.

This is not to call for a one-size-fits-all solution – my work on renewable energy policy has shown me that every jurisdiction designs and implements its own differently, according to local conditions and priorities – but general approaches that have proven successful in terms of policies and practices (like renewable energy feed-in tariffs or a knowledge-sharing website)



Miguel Mendonça is a research manager with the World Future Council

show you can successfully share the essence of a proven solution to a common issue.

What is also problematic is that we tend to work in silos, delivering our projects and aiming to keep funders happy. Organisations, enterprises and individuals become as protectionist as any business or nation. Their work is just as much about internal financial sustainability as environmental sustainability, a factor of how little money people are willing to put into these important activities. So, while it is understandable, it serves to defeat the overall objective of our work.

We must assume that the necessary changes and the urgency of implementing them will not come from business or government in time. Their decision-making processes are self-serving and largely based on their own short-term wants, rather than on the long-term needs of the majority – the common good.

Until we have made this leap, and succeeded in talking to one another more, and having the public behind us, environmentalists cannot construct a global game plan, with a tight timeline – and one so huge it creates a critical mass. Ideally, we need to put ourselves in a position to say to governments and business: 'This is what is necessary, and your voters and customers fully support it. You don't get to block this any more – you either come along with us and work within the new rules set out for the common good, or we swerve around you, and new companies and leaders come forth who understand the times we now live in.'

Without talking to one another more, we cannot construct a global game plan, with a tight deadline – and one so huge it creates a critical mass

In this joined-up approach we rely upon ourselves, on our creativity, inspiration and leadership, and on each other. A truly organised global movement, with the citizenry behind it, can have the force of a great river. At present, we are instead

many lone tributaries.

There are now those whose business it is to think about how we communicate with the public. A presentation from Futerra on a recent LEAD International training course highlighted how easily the public turn off. Hence creativity, excitement and fun are vital ingredients in the general messaging; show them the opportunities; show them a better vision of how the world could be.

And not just abstract ideas. Take participatory democracy in some parts of Brazil, for example, where citizens determine a certain amount of local public spending. The results have been astonishing. Frances Moore Lappé's book *Getting a Grip* provides exciting case studies on empowered communities; see especially the chapter 'What Democracy Feels Like'. Giving power and responsibility back to citizens and communities is essential, and we cannot expect active buy-in from an inactive, disenfranchised populace.

Truly to do its job, this great work must answer some of the most vexing questions related to sustainability and equity, especially overpopulation, renewables and energy access, food and water, land rights and so on. My work with the World Future Council has shown me there is already a massive body of work in existence on these things. We already have most of the answers, but the powers-that-be don't do equity, and many citizens in the developing world don't care much for it either. It seems that finding a way of getting enough support to deliver 'deeper green' change is the greatest challenge, especially in times of increasing economic doubt. Will desperation bring more people to our door? Will we be able to create that critical mass before then?

The answer may lie somewhere between society's disenfranchisement, atomisation and lack of faith in politicians and corporates, and people's need to connect, to cooperate, to have fun, to live lives with meaning. We can offer everyone a part to play in the greatest, most exciting journey in human history.

But how to begin? A Facebook group? Large public events? A conference? What do you think? Let us share ideas, and go for it. As the people who do this for a living, it is our job to figure out how to make this world work – and we must show true cooperation, creativity, urgency and leadership in doing so. If this has resonance for you, reader, let us talk.