

DEMOCRATISING TRANSFORMATION



SPURRING LEARNING AT PLANETARY SCALE – Nate Hagens / Institute for the Study of Energy and our Future

We live on islands of expertise in an ocean of disconnected thoughts and conversations. And so my work has tried to integrate human behaviour, psychology, the environment, economics, energy, natural resources, debt, and the economic system all into a cohesive picture where the pieces fit together. Because they do.

One of our biggest predicaments is that all the things that would be great for the environment will hurt our economy. And all the things that are great for the economy are impactful in deleterious ways to our environment. And so what institutions can do is to address this paradox.

I think public institutions can start to become more ecologically literate and look at a wider-boundary story of humanity. What I've found is: a lot of people haven't looked at the systemic underpinnings of our human economic system. But if you talk one on one with a leader or a scientist, all of this makes sense to them yet their jobs don't allow them to express this.

We may be reaching a tipping point where there needs to be a cohesive policy response. Because right now, what we're doing – by central banks guaranteeing and printing money and artificially low interest rates – is not only about kicking the can for a larger economic correction in the future, but psychologically, we're making the landscape look like there's no real problem here.

Public, private and corporate institutions have a real momentum that is based on a growth-oriented economy. And I think we are going to need public institutions more than we ever have. Countries that have stronger public institutions looking out for the greater good, that can extend the time horizon from this year to the next 20 years, are going to have advantages.

We're going to have to make some very difficult choices, because we've been alive during a period where the total pie grows every year. So we argue about where that pie should be distributed. But relatively soon, we will have a smaller pie. So the role of public institutions will be about what gets prioritised.

If you talk about making the implicit explicit, we need institutional and individual examples of people living lower-throughput lifestyles and thriving. Our institutions need to prepare for a 30% drop in affordability across the board in the coming decade.

With my work, I'm trying to prepare our society for a bend versus break moment. We can bend and become more resilient in the process, but there is a risk of breaking. And if we break, we can never get back to where something is stable and on a long term path.

Scenario workshops that embed people in the future are critically important, partially because it makes it more emotionally real, partially because while they're sleeping or fishing or gardening, the thoughts roll around in their head, and they get creative - but also, it needs to scale. That's why it is really important to build social networks ahead of time. Even if you don't have answers to the polycrisis, the mere fact of getting to know other people and talking about things forms a sort of social glue that will act as a bond of resilience.