



“The pandemic subtext is all about one question. How much longer are we going to continue pursuing a global development paradigm, many of whose fundamental premises we know to be false or at least incomplete?”

– Renata DESSALIEN, past resident coordinator of the United Nations in India

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From Voltaire's bastards to Intersecting

Humanity needs a new, more holistic, intersecting paradigm for understanding and solving our complex, interconnected challenges. This is not a new proposition, but it has perhaps never been more pressing, nor more evident.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed the issue up front and centre. The pandemic's subtext is a question: how much longer are we going to continue pursuing a paradigm, many of whose fundamental premises we know to be false or at least incomplete, and whose so-called externalities are coming back to haunt us with a vengeance?

COVID-19 has thrown some of these "externalities" into stark relief. Look, for example, at our persistent, blind destruction of the natural environment and its fragile ecosystems, to the point of facilitating the transfer of zoological diseases from animals to humans, with catastrophic consequences. And look at the double plight of the have-nots --

hit both on the health front (without access to health care, vaccines, or even oxygen), and on the economic front with the inhuman deprivations that so many have been forced to suffer due to persistent, deeply ingrained socioeconomic inequalities and injustices.

Like every storm, this pandemic may also have its silver lining. It has forced us to pause. It has jolted us and at least opened the possibility of an opportunity to recalibrate, to correct some of our misguided assumptions, strategies, approaches. Whether we take advantage of this opportunity remains to be seen, but it's out there staring us in the face. It's begging us to come back, or to build back from this crisis differently, more responsibly, more holistically, more inclusively.

Albert Einstein famously said that we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that we used when we created them. So, provoked by the COVID crisis, with existential planetary calamities looming over us, and with obscene inequalities undermining everything from the global vaccination drive, to social cohesion and economic stability -- what is wrong with our thinking? Have we remained tethered to the altar of economic growth at any costs, prioritizing financial gain over planetary survival, and greed over collective well-being because there were no other alternative paradigms around?

In 1972, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan famously stated that Gross National Happiness is more important

than gross national product. He was speaking for Bhutan, but his message applies to the world. He flagged that we have confused ends and means; we put the cart before the horse. And because of this, there is a fundamental disconnect between our dominant models of progress and the reality around us.

Thousands of Indigenous and traditional societies around the world understood this long ago. They developed holistic models and systems to address complex interconnected challenges within their societies and ecosystems. And there have been numerous attempts at alternative paradigms, especially since the end of the Cold-War. Back in 1990, UNDP launched the Human Development Report, classifying all countries according to a Human Development Index that expanded the concept of economic progress. On its heels came the Genuine Progress Indicator that factored in environmental and carbon footprints. In 2007, the Economic Commission, European Parliament and European Commission, the Club of Rome, OECD and WWF, launched the Beyond GDP Initiative. Two years later, the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi commission came up with a conceptual framework for balancing economic performance with social progress and environmental preservation and protection. Then in 2015, the member states of the United Nations collectively produced the holistic Agenda 21 and the 17 well-rounded, interconnected Sustainable Development Goals, designed to trigger transformative change and accelerate progress simultaneously across numerous goals, enabling those furthest behind to catch up.

Such frameworks may not be perfect, but they show significant and persistent efforts to bring together multiple, interrelated elements of solutions to complex interconnected challenges. And yet we collectively continue to be swept up by the conventions of the dominant eternal growth paradigm, with its narrow, utilitarian, extractive emphases. What is wrong with our thinking?

It is worth recalling here the work of John Ralston Saul, Canadian economist, philosopher and author of “Voltaire’s Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West”. Saul describes Voltaire’s attempt to introduce a more humanist approach in the wake of centuries of Church dogma and arbitrary aristocratic rule. Voltaire was addressing the context and problems of his age and he elevated reason and rationality as a counterbalance to blind adherence to the dictates of the church and aristocracy. His contributions, alongside other luminaries of the Enlightenment era, led to an extraordinary awakening, and indeed in emancipation in Europe and beyond. But John Ralston Saul claims that the great philosopher’s ideas were gradually deformed, taken out of context, reduced. He says Voltaire intended to elevate reason and rationality to a place alongside other critical human faculties, not as an exclusive or even the most important human faculty. But his legacy was narrowed, twisted out of shape and truncated.

In a subsequent and equally fascinating book titled ‘On Equilibrium’ Saul presents what he believes to be six essen-

tial human faculties. In addition to reason, these are: ethics, intuition, memory, imagination, and common sense. These faculties should function together in a seamless, iterative manner, with humanism emerging from a dynamic equilibrium across the six faculties. Saul suggests that trouble starts when the balance is disrupted. According to Saul, this is what happened to Voltaire's ideas on reason in the hands of his illegitimate offspring -- they elevated reason into a false god. And this led to simplistic, linear approaches, delusions of certainties, and eventually congealed into utilitarian ideology and orthodoxies like free-market economics and technological determinisms. So, in the name of Enlightenment, we diminished our own intelligence and created paradigms and systems that allowed greed to triumph and the environment to be plundered to the point of undermining vital planetary support systems.

It's hard to take issue with the Age of Reason during our current post truth era, full of fake news, infotainment, opinions masquerading as facts, and the likes. I'm sure many of us fear that we are edging toward a point of wholesale rejection of reason and rationality, with scary consequences. Saul was a big fan of the Enlightenment and of reason, but in conjunction with our other human faculties, not a reductionist version of rationality that binds and blinds us from seeing the forest for the trees. He encourages us to take on the narrowization of reason so as to save reason and to restore it among our other human faculties where it works best.

I think Saul's observations are germane to the topic of intersecting. I also feel we have a lot to learn from India and Asia in general on this subject. Asia certainly embraced important elements of the Enlightenment, yet it did so alongside a rich and vibrant culture of relational, iterative, circular thinking. This allowed space for intersecting across areas, interventions, processes, stakeholder groups, etc.

We would be well served by learning more from Asia and from traditional societies and alternative paradigms around the world. While acknowledging the strengths that the Age of Reason brought us, we need to be more honest of the dire consequences of allowing narrow, extractive bastardized versions of Voltaire to continue dominating our thinking and our systems. Free markets certainly allocate scarce resources more efficiently than planned economies, but surely that does not justify the world's richest 1 per cent accumulating twice as much wealth as 90 per cent of the global population, some 6.9 billion people¹? How is that fair? And surely that does not justify the blind pillage of nature as if there were no tomorrow? How is that even rational?

Our dominant paradigms, our policy making, our systems – our governance – all of it needs a serious Intersecting upgrade. We need to acknowledge the limits of our current dogma and ideologies and develop more well-rounded ways of bringing together interconnecting strands into a coherent set of solutions to our multiple challenges.

In conclusion, we need to work on three fronts simultaneously:

1. firstly, we need to openly accept that while our dominant paradigms may still have some redeeming features, by and large, they are no longer fit for purpose. We need new, more holistic, intersecting frameworks and paradigms. And we need them now.

2. secondly, we need to foster and reward new mindsets for 21st century problem solving, mindsets that draw on all six of our core human faculties, together, synergistically – reason, ethics, intuition, memory, imagination and common sense.

3. thirdly, our institutional structures and systems, public and private, were designed for our current obsolete paradigm. They are siloed and fragmented and unable to adequately coordinate or connect essential elements together for coherent outcomes. At the same time, they have enabled highly specialized, rigorous work that has contributed enormously to human progress. We need to preserve the best of what science-based specialization has bestowed on the world, while forging the means for broader, more holistic, intersecting and inclusive institutions and systems to deal with our complex challenges. This includes designing new Intersecting incentive systems and infrastructure, new Intersecting processes, new Intersecting institutional designs, and more.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the need for such course change more obvious and urgent than ever before. Now is the time to strike. We have everything to gain and little to lose.

1. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/5-shocking-facts-about-extreme-global-in-equality-and-how-even-it>