

TÄLLBERG FOUNDATION

CONCEPT PAPER
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Tällberg Forum 2008 How on earth can we live together? In search of the common sense

Beginning on June 26, 2008 the Tällberg Forum will gather leaders and thinkers from seventy nations for four days of conversations and workshops related to the opportunities and challenges of global interdependence. Tällberg conversations have increasingly focused on the systems problems emerging from the growing imbalance between nature and human activity. Can we design, govern and manage the sustainable interaction between natural systems and the systems of human activity? Can we negotiate among ourselves the resolution of the planetary crisis? Can we find better ways to integrate the work of governments and institutions with the actions of other actors from civil society, business, finance, philanthropy or technology when tackling sustainability? The Forum will explore boundary conditions, prioritize “counter-tipping points” and generate concrete ideas and proposals for policy, strategy and institutional development that work in the interests of the whole.

”Do we know what to do? Probably yes. Will we do it? Probably not.” These were the closing words of the Tällberg Forum 2007, a realist view of our common situation with regard to climate, sustainability and the necessary transition we must all achieve. The words were also the starting point of the march towards the Tällberg Forum 2008.

These words imply that you and I have a good grasp of what the problems are and what we need to do to move towards overcoming them. We know how to be economical, to live in harmony with those closest to us and our community. We know how to cultivate our gardens and lands to sustain nature’s ecological balances. We

know how to stay out of trouble and protect our homes and livelihoods. This knowledge has helped us humans to live by and large in a workable harmony amongst ourselves and with nature – until a century ago.

But the words also suggest that something has changed. That achieving this convergence of common interests today and in the future may be beyond our grasp, for at least two reasons.

Firstly, we do not have the structures for governing the commons. Our governance is built on the principle of national sovereignty, legitimizing the pursuit of a nation’s perceived interests. This principle states

that those natural resources that lie within the borders of any nation-state are its own property. But a nation represents only a part of the whole of the earth, a smaller “we”. The larger “we”, the whole, has to do with the earth system, with nature and humanity as a part thereof. Nature, with its life-sustaining systems, is not sovereign property.

Secondly, we find it difficult to care for the interests of the whole. We have become embroiled in our own special interests. We seem no longer able to exercise our practical and intuitive wisdom of how to manage our lives. One reason for this is that the process of globalization has led to an escalating interdependence, which puts limits on our ability to exercise our individual wisdom and common sense.

Therefore, we have to set out on a search for the common sense needed. Because the heart of the matter is survival. Our interference with nature is now happening at a speed that outstrips the evolution process, making it impossible for our relationship with nature to adapt harmoniously.

Nearing nature’s limits

The awareness of the limits of the natural resources to satisfy human needs has grown over the last 50 years. There is among scientists acute concern over the state of critical natural systems and a number of key eco-system services: fresh water and oceans, fish stocks and coral reefs, rainforests and tundra, glaciers and sea ice. And – on top of it all – human-induced climate change.

Population growth and the dramatic development of technology, economic systems and business models have refined the speed and efficiency with which material wealth (GDP) has been depleting nature. Mankind has refined the instruments through which energy and matter is turned into wealth and livelihoods. Population is estimated to grow by another 40 to 50 percent over the next

50 years, and the global economy by 100 to 200 percent. The positive fallout is that poverty and misery could be eradicated. The negative is that the planet may not be able to sustain this level of activity.

Throughout history, mankind has successfully overcome the scarcity of specific resources. Over-exploitation has been solved through substitution, emigration, technological breakthroughs or in some worst cases civilization collapse. What is new today is that the exploitation is at a planetary scale (thanks to population growth and the process of globalization), that it affects those resources that are the most basic and fundamental to human survival (e.g. water), and that it has set in motion irreversible natural processes, of whose dynamics we know very little (e.g. climate).

Disappearing ground-water will not come back. Lost aquifers are lost. Thawing permafrost will not freeze again. Collapsing ice-sheets will not reconstruct. Greenhouse gases remain in the atmosphere for centuries. Desertified land is reclaimed with enormous difficulty. Eroded soils are gone forever. These are no small matters.

The common sense that we used to apply in our own lives to reconcile and harmonize human activities must now be rediscovered and applied with unprecedented speed and efficacy.

This we have to do while continuing to apply and develop key great human achievements: democracy, human rights and justice, to which we can add the principles of an open and democratically-governed market economy. Together and to date, these form the height of human civilization. Not even in the worst of crisis can we afford to turn our backs on any of these principles. History has shown us that the most horrific crises like World War II could be overcome by mobilizing a total societal effort that does not set aside democratic principles.

The time for concerted action is now. Unfortunately, our track record in this area is dismal: we have not been able to craft a single truly successful international agreement, convention, treaty or protocol in the field of the common management of natural resources. Few if any have been respected when it comes to content, timetable and results. This time, trusting the growing body of scientific knowledge and understanding of our predicament, we now have to rise to the occasion. If not us, who? If not now, when?

The question for Tällberg

This systems problem is the question that the Tällberg Foundation now proposes to tackle: how can we design, govern and manage the sustainable interaction between natural systems and the system of human activity.

The Tällberg conversations have historically emphasized the absolute necessity of taking a systems approach to a complex systems problem. A reductionist, linear, compartmentalized approach has shaped the way governance and strategy is organized, but it has helped get us to today's crisis point.

The inertia of the reductionist linear model stems from stakeholders (nation-states, corporations) who always seek solutions that satisfy their interests. In essence, the world is organized to maximize the "profits" of its parts. The affairs of mankind are far too often settled according to a principle of a balance of power between conflicting interests. The compromises reached are rarely in the interest of the whole system (economic, security, equity, energy).

Systems are not about maximization. They are about serving a purpose. A system is always more than the sum of its parts. It is simply not possible to maximize economic growth everywhere; to maximize personal

wealth while at the same time safeguarding the health of natural and climate systems. However, security for everyone and equity and justice in the allocation of rights and resources, is possible while respecting the limits set by nature.

As difficult as the complexity of systemic solutions may be, they are more necessary than ever. Denying the real complexity of the issues at hand – be they mitigating climate change, achieving global equity, maintaining the provision of energy, safeguarding geopolitical security or securing economic growth – is a populist and dishonest stance. Einstein once said: "make things as simple as possible – but not simpler".

The ambition of the Tällberg Foundation's work – starting with the Tällberg Forum 2008 – is to transform an ever-deepening understanding of complex systems into practical ideas for policy, strategy and institutional development.

This work has to begin with a profound understanding of natural systems. Humans are just a part of these, one of millions of species that evolution has produced and will continue produce. Fundamentally, the purpose of the natural system and of the process of evolution is, quite simply, to generate life – that then generates more life.

The Tällberg Foundation has together with the Stockholm Environment Institute launched a project – "Towards a Tällberg Consensus" – that connects world-class scientific expertise to the process.

Deeper insights about the systems of human activity are also necessary. For the sake of simplicity (but without oversimplifying), we have divided them into four:

1. The economic system, whose purpose is to produce economic growth and material welfare,
2. The energy production system, whose purpose is to fuel human activity since energy is a pre-requisite

for all human production and activity

3. Community and equity system, whose purpose is to develop political, cultural and social systems that allow for a just allocation of resources and welfare to all people and to safeguard democracy and the rule of law.
4. Security systems, whose purpose is to safeguard both human security and safe relations between the humans and the rest of nature.

The Tällberg Forum 2008

At the Tällberg Forum 2008, this systems understanding will be used in three steps:

- Explore boundary conditions
- Prioritize among “counter-tipping points”.
- Generate concrete ideas and proposals for policy, strategy and institutional development.

A first question to explore at the Forum is whether key boundary conditions can be defined for the sub-systems of human activity: these are limits that must not be crossed if the health and integrity of the whole is to be safeguarded today and in the future. Here are some examples: How much fresh water can we use? What are the limits to deforestation? Which should be the limit to CO2 concentration in the atmosphere? What are the limits to exploitation of ocean fishing? Which are the foundations of the food chain that must be preserved, both in the oceans and on land? For these questions, there are absolutes, imposed by nature.

Other boundary conditions are those that we impose upon ourselves, with a moral base. The Millennium Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are a beginning. But they stop short of bounding the world into a common development process, where rich countries are bound to deliver absolute minimums. These

(ethical) boundary conditions refer to equity and economy. They refer to the minimum levels of food, water, energy and security that are morally acceptable, and lead to questions such as: Which minimum level of income can we accept? What are the minimum requirements that any democracy or rule of law, any national constitution must accept? Under which conditions should nations be adopted and included into coming global governance regimes? What roles will civil society have? How can we define growth in both quantitative and qualitative terms? What environmental criteria must become part of our economic calculations? What kind of economic policy can safeguard the balance between economic growth, equity and nature?

The second challenge at the Tällberg Forum is to identify the “counter tipping-points”. These are the policies or actions that can as quickly as possible tip the systems of human activity towards balance with the natural systems. Which are the best existing initiatives, ideas, technologies, designs, etc. that have been identified as ways to solve the problem? Prior to the Forum, a preparatory process will make this inventory, and the task for the Forum will be to prioritize among them to select the ideas that can become the most important counter tipping-points.

The third challenge that the Forum will tackle is to generate concrete ideas and proposals. In the end, it is the way we apply our thinking through new solutions, new products, new technologies, new constitutions and new institutions that shows us the way forward. But in order to be successful, we have to start from the problems, the issues as they have emerged. We would inevitably go wrong if we started from the existing institutions.

The ideas and proposals generated at the Tällberg Forum do not aim to be “finished products”, but rather prototypes. Prototyping is a tool that corporations have used for

a long time to organize and focus the work of innovative processes, and especially those dealing with complex systems adaptation. Also, a prototype becomes a very effective communication tool through its embodiment of the ideas it corresponds to, and R&D experts can then be inspired by it and turn it into a new product.

The prototyping at the Forum will be focused on the issue at hand – the governance and management of a sustainable interaction between natural systems and the systems of human activity. The prototyping will be done in small groups of Forum participants – prototyping laboratories – gathering people from different disciplines and with varying skills. The groups can be offered different tasks, questions and ideas, clustered around a number of themes, but they can also choose their own. They should deliver a “result” to be put on the table at the end of the Forum.

Tällberg Deliverables

The process up to and during the Forum will result in three different deliverables that the Tällberg Foundation will present:

1. A strategic position paper (drafted before the Forum, revised afterwards) that defines the systems problem and specifies boundary conditions.

2. An inventory of potential counter-tipping points, and the Forum’s prioritization.
3. A report from the Forum groups that have worked on the themes.
4. A synthesizing analysis including policy recommendations.

A global commons

When the participants meet in Tällberg, in the Forum tent on the village commons, with the breathtaking view of nature at its most beautiful, overlooking meadows, Lake Siljan and the mountains beyond, they will create for a few days a “Global commons”. The plenary sessions will gather around a large round negotiating table – with an image of earth on its top – that provides the central metaphor for the discussions. The table helps focus the conversations on the basic question which lies at the heart of the Tällberg Forum: How on earth can we live together?

The negotiating table shows that the obstacles ahead are essentially about how to agree between ourselves – how to strike a deal. As we all know, we cannot negotiate with nature, we can only strike deals among ourselves. And that is what now must be done.

