



Universal Sustainability: The Economy and Competitiveness 2012

By Robert L. Lattimer

“We are unsettled to the very roots of our being... There are no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that wasn’t made for a simpler age. We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves.”

—Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*, 1914

Framing the Issue

The needs of the 21st century global society are numerous—issues involving the economy, education, environment, political systems, social structures, science and technology, war, regional conflicts, healthcare, nutrition, acceptance of diversity, economic inequalities, globalization, and so much more.

It is my position that the operating framework of universal sustainability may hold the key to unlocking the next wave of business innovation and growth. It may also promise to reconnect economic competitive organizations and policy makers with that of the success of the global society. It is this new model, this new construct of universal sustainability that may well shape the next form of competitiveness.

It is further my premise that universal sustainability goes beyond the concept of sustainability, which has a primary focus on the environment, conservation, and preservation. Universal sustainability—as seen through the lens of the social and ecological consequences of economic activity in concept and by function and through the application of science and research—is a new economic and social discipline, which seeks to explore the universe in which humans live and from which humans seek to continue to explore.

The process framework that is contained within universal sustainability touches all aspects of the human existence and is thus reflected by the essential components of the global condition—such as a society’s economy, global competitiveness, education, environment, workforce develop-

ment, political systems, social structure, science, technology, global society, and even out to the entire planetary universe.

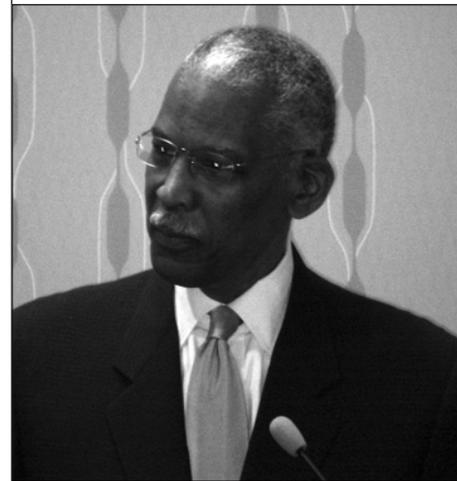
The concept of universal sustainability, to be applied effectively, will require all of us to become 21st century transformational thinkers, concept developers, and infrastructure builders of the highest order, with the provocative objective to come together to safeguard nature’s elements. This process of progressive improvement will require, at the very least, a formal process of 21st century visioning, which will incorporate the current as well as the future state of our universe with all of its promise and challenges.

As such, my definition of a universal sustainable global society is a society that strives to understand the universe and its resources, for which it uses, preserves, seeks to explore, and to exist within.

The Current Reality

The current global economic crisis, cultural differences, and political discourse have created the reality that the world’s leading economies are facing a crisis related to the vulnerability of most economic systems—the boom and the bust. Such factors as rising income inequality, unsustainable governmental obligations, political restructuring, the decreasing size of the modern middle class, increasing poverty, widespread erosion of public trust, and environmental change have led, in many countries, to the response by many policy makers of borrowing from the future on a massive scale.

From an American-centric viewpoint, globalization, the revolution in information technology, the nation’s chronic deficits, and America’s pattern of excessive energy consumption spell out what the United States needs to address to attain a more sustainable restoration of the American dream and to preserve American power in the world. This period of globalization and disrupt-



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tive technological change, also distilled and made toxic by the Great Recession of 2008, left the 21st century global society tattered.

Another factor that is adding to this crisis is the economic rift between the global rich and all others. A cultural rift has grown, and for the very rich in particular, global affinities and global ambitions are quickly supplanting national ties and national concerns. Increasingly, the very rich see themselves as members of the global elite with whom they have more in common than with other classes of the global society. Being politically influential and economically powerful, they are becoming a separate society, one with its own distinct goals. As a result, the world is rapidly becoming a global society with the new politics of grievance; we only have to refer to the Occupy movement, or even the Europeans, who in 1999 created a common currency with the goal to secure and to re-assert its economic influence in the world. But now the Europeans are seeking solutions to complex current economic and social challenges to the very nature of their existents.

The new tipping point would suggest that borrowing from the future by way of deficit spending shows our inability, or our refusal, to assume the responsibility for the impact of a decade of excesses of today's choices on tomorrow's prospects.

The calculus of sustainability is rarely applied to such issues, except in isolation, and that is because its problem-solving and decision-making boundaries are perceived as too narrow, that is they are focused on environmental and conservation issues. Yet the introduction of a new, more expanded model of universal sustainability, and its framework of a more interconnected and integrative approach, offers greater resolution to the issues as presented within this current and challenging reality.

Redefining Sustainability: Establishing a Global Value System

Although the roots of universal sustainability grew out of the sustainability movement, universal sustainability should be considered as the next generation of sustainability through leadership, visioning, strategy, and programing.

Universal sustainability foundational roots have been established in the past two years within the social and competitive nature of the economic system. And based on my work within The Sustainability Collaborative SustaiNext LLC, the concept is defined as policies and operating practices that enhance the competitiveness of

organizations, while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions within the global communities in which the universal sustainability process framework is applied.

As such, universal sustainability has a focus on identifying and establishing the intersection of societal and economic progress. The concept rests on the premise that both economic and social progress ought to be addressed to attain the highest returns on global social progress, rather than on a narrow definition of profit.

The operational concept of universal sustainability resets the boundaries of capitalism by integrating competitive economic, organizational processes with that of societal indicators for progress. As a result, this new integrative approach will open up many ways to address old needs and to resolve new ones, gain efficiency, create differentiation, and to expand into new markets and innovative spaces.

The model of implementing universal sustainability is to have competitive organizations integrate their processes within social programming, such as Social Indicators for Progress, Human Development Index, and/or the design of more sustainable economics. For example, does it have meaning to refer to America as the richest nation in the world, if, as is the case, 22 percent of the population lives in some form of poverty? Or would not it create a more humane and stable society by referring to America as a country of wealth that is achieving success by the effective application of its resources to the eradication of poverty and to the preservation of the environment? Would that be a more complete case to present? Would this not be a more influential way to redefine the global standard for gross domestic product (GDP)? Would this approach be more sustainable? I would think that most truly strategically thinking shareholders would buy into this formula as a more meaningful form of a return on investment—as a more universal sustainable growth platform.

As Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum have suggested in their new book, *That Used To Be Us* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), and as Dov Seidman has outlined in *his recent work*, there are two competing values that animate business, government, leadership, individual behavior, and relationships. Seidman refers to them as “situational values” and “sustainable values,” and both are fundamental to my concept of universal sustainability.

Seidman suggests that situational values involve calculations about what is available in the here and now; they are about exploiting short-term

opportunities rather than consistently living the principles that may create long-term success. As he says, “they are about what we can and cannot do in any given situation.”

Seidman describes sustainable values as what we should and should not do in situations. Sustainable values are the values that connect us deeply as humans, such as shared responsibility. In effect, these values are about how, not how much. On the other hand, as Seidman states, situational values push us toward the strategy of becoming “too big to fail.” In other words, sustainable values inspire us to pursue the strategy of becoming “too sustainable to fail.” Seidman further explains that what makes an institution sustainable is not the scale and size it reaches, but how it does its business, how it relates to its employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers, the environment, society, and to future generations. Or how a government treats its citizens.

Now it’s important that I make clear that my definition of universal sustainability is not one of social responsibility, philanthropy, or even sustainability as it is commonly understood.

Universal sustainability is a more expanded process leading to the achievement of economic and social progress. It is not at the margin of what economic competitive organizations do; it is at the center of what organizations and governmental strategy should be to ensure a more globally sustainable society. A strategy that is based on investing in the universal sustainability formula for the economy, education, science, technology, social structure, research and development thus ensures that economic growth is a source for a quality of standard of living throughout the global society.

I propose that the concept of universal sustainability, in form and function, would allow all of us, from the many varied sectors of the global society, to behave based less on situational values and more on sustainable ones.

The New Age of Competitiveness: The Promise of Universal Sustainability 2012

I would suspect that some capital markets will undoubtedly continue to pressure organizations to generate short-term profits, and some economically competitive organizations will surely continue to act with situational values of interest, and, as a result, will continue to reap profits at the expense of societal stability. But, I would predict that such profits will often prove to be short-lived and far greater opportunities will surely be

missed by such an enterprise. And the same can be said for governments that would exploit their citizenry to extend their power. However, what is now needed is a more sophisticated form of capitalism, of governmental policy imbued with the universal sustainability model—not out of charity, environmentalism, or preservation, but out of a deeper understanding of the new economic realities. This evolution in the capitalist model would recognize new and better ways of applying sustainable values for global economic growth, development, and stability.

It is further my premise that there is a need to adapt institutions to the new, to the future realities, such as reforming governments ability to establish and strengthen their systems of governance toward reducing economic inequality and improving the social and environmental conditions.

A recalibration is now in order, a kind of rebooting of the current global economic and governmental institutions, using the operational framework of universal sustainability.

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