**Some Hope in the Horror of the Climate Train Crash**

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Perhaps, as the father of five and a chronic eco-worrier, I should have chosen a different career. For several decades I have watched the ever-scarier climate data piling up and have moved back and forth between hope and horror. Right now we have the hope that comes from the massive acceleration in the declarations of climate emergency. That, however, is offset by the horror of what has triggered these declarations: half the world, it seems, is on fire; the other half is submerged under melting ice, rising sea levels and raging hurricanes.

To make it a perfect storm, so to speak, we have the emergence of the Global New Right, or ‘Populism’ as it has come to be called: a peculiar phenomenon in which, in their understandable anger and desire for change, a growing mass of often disenfranchised under-privileged people have somehow been persuaded to vote for a group of super-privileged leaders who have set about making the rich-poor divide even wider. These new leaders seem to be determined to rub salt into the poverty wound by overturning legislation that might have slowed up the climate train crash. And we all know who suffers most from climate change: yes, the under-privileged.

Sorry to seem a doom-monger, but another cause for despair might be the apparent impossibility of untangling our global economic system as a whole from the climate catastrophe that is unfolding everywhere. Even beacons of the establishment such as the Financial Times and the Economist are now wondering aloud whether capitalism itself might not be the problem. However, asking most people – especially those who benefit most from it – to question capitalism is like suggesting to the cancer patient that the best cure might be to curtail their oxygen-breathing habit.

By now you might be wondering where there can possibly be any hope, as promised in the title above, in all this gloom. Well, it all began when I published an [article](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/i-am-speechless-why-would-you-throw-away-12m-chance-barnard-weston/) expressing my frustration (again) at the inability of one client to activate a simple piece of advice that could have saved them £12 million and reduced their climate impacts enormously. A man called Colin Grant replied, saying he might have a solution to this problem. It was a piece of software that does automatically what I had been advocating (and delivering ‘manually’) to clients for years: it combines the numbers and narrative of sustainability.

Why is this important? Because, in my opinion, it might be the only way we can prevent – or at least mitigate and adapt to – the biggest disaster in human history. And I think that’s pretty significant.

So what’s so fundamentally important about numbers and narrative? OK, first off, no financially responsible organization is going to spend money without good prospects of a healthy return on its investment. The numbers do that: ‘we cut energy costs by twenty-five million and the cost was only a fifth of that.’ ‘For every pound we spent on preventive healthcare, we saved seven pounds in treatment costs; we also reduced carbon emissions with all the increased walking, cycling and meat-free eating!’ (Of course, that last part was narrative, complementing – and complemented by – the numbers.)

In far too many cases, factors like organizational politics or the inertia of habit can prevent such apparent ‘no-brainers’ from being put into practice (see my earlier article, as mentioned above). When this is the case, the narrative can prove vital to success: a powerful story can inspire people to change where cold numbers just don’t cut the mustard – we claim to make our decisions 90% rationally and 10% emotionally but, in fact, it is often the other way round.

Another vitally important issue that prevents so much potential success is the diversity of initiatives: when there are many good things going on, from car-sharing to insulation, from composting to renewables, it can seem impossible to create a single, simple, cohesive and compelling narrative, let alone numbers, to account for, celebrate and maximize returns on achievements made. This problem is made worse when apparently modest contributions to the mix – for instance the elimination of plastic straws or cups – are dismissed as tokenistic or irrelevant. All these problems can be removed at source by the simple technique of reporting total progress against a full set of multi-disciplinary standards – best in class being the UN Sustainable Development Goals – in one ongoing coherent updating process.

Finally, most information about achievements and lessons learned in all our passionate, hopeful, positive projects is stuck in little-read annual reports, hidden spreadsheets, old slide decks and dusty filing cabinets, never to be seen again. When we can instantly see all of what’s happening in real time and feel part of something much bigger than little us, we can begin to feel that, together, we’re making a real difference.

And that inspires hope, more action and a sense that, whatever the future holds, we are not alone.

And that, in turn, softens the horror with some hope.