

SUSTAINABLE FUTURES: AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

By Raphael Kaplinsky

Reviewed by Warigia M. Bowman and Rhyder Murree Jolliff*

In this sprawling monograph, Raphael Kaplinsky demonstrates that sustainability measures cannot be both practical and inspiring.¹ *Sustainable Futures: An Agenda for Action* ambitiously attempts to span numerous social science disciplines with particular emphasis on environmental studies, sociology, and economic analytics. His thesis is that the issues of sustainability across these three areas are interlinked and structurally related to one another in ways that require them to be understood as such in order to effectively address sustainability going forward.² The author thus attempts to lay out an integrated program spanning economic, social and environmental agendas which he asks governments as well as other stakeholders to participate in.

Kaplinsky argues that the past several centuries have been punctuated by surges in economic growth which he terms techno-economic paradigms that reflect different ways of organizing production and society.³ He identifies four preceding paradigms: water power, steam power, iron/steel/steamships/telegraph, and mass production.⁴ Each of these flourished then passed into crisis, to be succeeded by a new paradigm. Kaplinsky hones in on the world's environmental tension—humans have damaged our environment, and the environment is damaging us. These crises are in part a function of the decay of the most recent techno-economic paradigm, Mass Production. He pins his hopes on the emergence of a new paradigm he calls Information, Communications and Technology (“ICT”), which he suggests offers the potential for a more inclusive society, a more sustainable economy, and a more equal polity.⁵

At some points, the author's approach may romanticize the past. For example, Kaplinsky suggests that after World War II, a relatively cohesive period of liberal democracy that he titles the Golden Age, transitioned after 1970 into the contemporary era of endemic conflict, culture wars, and the rise of populism.⁶ Perhaps the author's argument is more nuanced than the reviewers observe. Yet,

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1. RAPHAEL KAPLINKSY, *SUSTAINABLE FUTURES: AN AGENDA FOR ACTION* (2021)

2. *See id.* at 1.

3. *See id.*

4. *See id.* at 100.

5. *See* Kaplinsky, *supra* note 1, at 121-41 (describing ICTs and their potential to drive future economic growth and improve social and environmental sustainability).

6. *See id.* at 8.

the period of liberal democracy from 1900-2000 inside the United States and Europe was one of endemic conflict, and culture wars, if one thinks of Jim Crow, the prevalence of segregation, discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities in both North America and Europe, and of course, the terror of the Cold War. Even his own text occasionally belies this overly simplified narrative when he discusses the dramatic increases in inequality in Thatcher's Britain and the savage crushing of striking coal miners.⁷ In a future version of the work, the author may wish to resolve these narrative tensions.

The author does, however, helpfully focus on the importance of infrastructure, observing that energy, water and roads are essential elements which the government must provide to ensure production and distribution.⁸ To this extent, Kaplinsky's work is timely and in line with the "zeitgeist," revealing a passion for both infrastructure and efforts to slow climate change.

His discussion of the stark rise of economic inequality in China, Russia, the US, France and the UK since the 1980s is both valuable and thorough.⁹ Disturbingly, Kaplinsky documents that in these countries, the top 1% of the nation owns an increasingly disproportionate share of total wealth, far in excess of 25%.¹⁰ Simultaneously, as wealth concentrates in the hands of a small number of people at the very top, so too does poverty increasingly subsume a larger and larger percentage of the world's population.

He also helpfully documents the rise of "absolute poverty" in North America and Europe, observing that Covid-19 has only accelerated these trends.¹¹ Indeed, in the UK, homelessness has increased 60% since 2010.¹² He also draws connections between increasing inequality, a decline in social well-being, a decline in civic engagement, and poorer health outcomes in the wealthier countries he is studying.¹³ Neo-liberal austerity policies, as well as the reduction of corporate tax rates play a key factor in the rise of inequality, argues Kaplinsky.¹⁴ At times, the author's argumentation drifts slightly, combining discussions of austerity policies with musings on the changing communications environment, and anti-immigration fears.

The book focuses on the experience of the dominant high-income economies in North America, Europe and Japan under the theory that these countries continue to dominate the world. This decision to focus on some units of analysis to make the text more accessible is a reasonable editorial decision, but it limits the book's generalizability. Perhaps future versions will include case studies of more countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, to make the book's conclusions more generalizable.

Kaplinsky envisions the world through paradigms and sets those against a 3.2-billion-year historical backdrop. His use of illustrative figures breaks up the

7. *See id.* at 35.

8. *See id.*

9. *See* KAPLINSKY, *supra* note 1, at 37-42.

10. *See id.* at 32.

11. *See id.* at 43.

12. *See id.* at 44.

13. *See* KAPLINSKY, *supra* note 1, at 44-51.

14. *See id.* at 51-58.

usual monotony of historical reading on climate and ecological disruptions. These disruptions are compared to societal disruptions caused by the developments of technological and scientific revolutions with which readers are likely to be familiar.

By using real-world examples, such as the environmental impact and useful life cycle of an iPhone, Kaplinsky makes his argument comprehensible by the everyday reader. This same reader can, further, understand the seriousness of environmental crises by Kaplinsky's use of present threats: the rise of zoonotic diseases, such as COVID-19; the catastrophic impact of pollution and climate change on biodiversity in plant and insect species; and the increasing frequency of natural disasters.

The heart of the book's argument is that the current environmental crisis facing Planet Earth is an existential threat.¹⁵ He provides the lay reader with an overview of the biosphere, the last glacial period, and the rise of industrialization. He walks the reader through the creation of the steam engine, the beginnings of electrification, an overview of resource extraction, and advances in energy use. This is an enormous amount of information. *Sustainable Futures* attempts to make the provision of such information more manageable and accessible by providing data and figures that highlight their significance and flaws, and by providing context for their use in sustainability measures individually and in conjunction with other data.

Before launching into his proposed sustainability agenda, Kaplinsky emphasizes, "the way in which societies are organized and governed determines the extent and nature of humankind's environmental footprint."¹⁶ By drawing on personal experiences, Kaplinsky illustrates the importance of the policy process, including the why, what, how, and who of policymaking. He fervently believes that ICTs will provide the capacity to revive productivity growth, that they will bring production closer to the consumer, and provide the capacity for shared products. He evinces faith in the ability of ICTs to play a role in the development of renewable energy. Kaplinsky recognizes that ICTs may cause detrimental effects as well, and notes the importance of what he calls "directionality."¹⁷

Kaplinsky's recommendations for change cover multiple chapters. He advocates regulating and changing behavior in the financial sector, implementing a Smart Green New Deal, strengthening global and local governance, and redistributing wealth and reducing the power of giant corporations. He suggests decisive action, predicts reactionary power bases, and provides suggestions in response to these bases. Kaplinsky suggests several stakeholders and other society members who might play a role in sustainability policy measures: governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations, to name a few.

These reviewers are somewhat less sanguine than the author about the transformative potential of ICTs for transforming economic and social relations in the sustainability arena. This skepticism emerges from extensive research and

15. *See id.* at 65.

16. *Id.* at 94.

17. *See* KAPLINSKY, *supra* note 1, at 121.

publishing on the potential of ICTs in Africa. The author does focus his work on the Americas and Europe. However, in order to expand these policy prescriptions to Latin America, Asia, and Africa, it is important to acknowledge the unequal distribution of electricity and other infrastructure that are required to power ICTs. This issue blunts the value of Kaplinsky's recommendations for the Global South.

One idea worthy of remark is the "Smart Green New Deal," which the author proposes.¹⁸ This is an amalgamation of existing policies coming out of the Progressive Wing of the Democratic Party combined with the author's techno-utopian ICT vision. The author emphasizes an important point that bears repeating: "many of the 'costs of the green economy' are in fact opportunities for value addition and growth."¹⁹ He also discusses the Circular Economy, which is apparently a popular concept in Europe, and provides some ideas about the role of norms and behavior and changes in design philosophy. Kaplinsky also notes the role of innovation which the Smart Green New Deal could spark, which as a corollary also offers opportunities for economic growth.

Sustainable Futures by Raphael Kaplinsky provides an interesting vision of a techno-utopic future. There is nothing completely new in this book, but the assembly and presentation provokes introspection. If you are looking for practical, hard-hitting, detailed prescriptions on what to do to reach a sustainable energy future, you will not find them in this text. The author provides a vision and a policy agenda, but also attempts to discuss the circumstances under which this policy agenda can be implemented.

The "how" aspect of Kaplinsky's book is truly ambitious and visionary, if not simple to operationalize. Although it will be incredibly challenging to attain the synchronized responses that Kaplinsky lays out, it is a worthy task. These policy goals include "redistributing wealth and incomes and reducing the power of corporations." This policy recommendation, in particular, is likely to meet significant social and political resistance. He believes that the private sector will provide the motivation and that the government will be the leader. The private sector may not be as sanguine about this policy goal as the author. Similarly, "strengthening global and local governance" is certainly a laudable goal, but also a vast one, as is "promoting global development." Any one of these topics could have made an excellent focus, and would allow the author to drill down into the topic. Yet, the author's decision to take these synchronized set of responses and present them in the context of a push towards sustainability is novel and innovative. Kaplinsky offers a long, detailed, vast book of vision, which may inspire readers.

18. *See id.* at 185-88

19. *Id.* at 186.