



Transforming economics and governance for better health and sustainable societies

Workshop
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Adelaide

Summary Report

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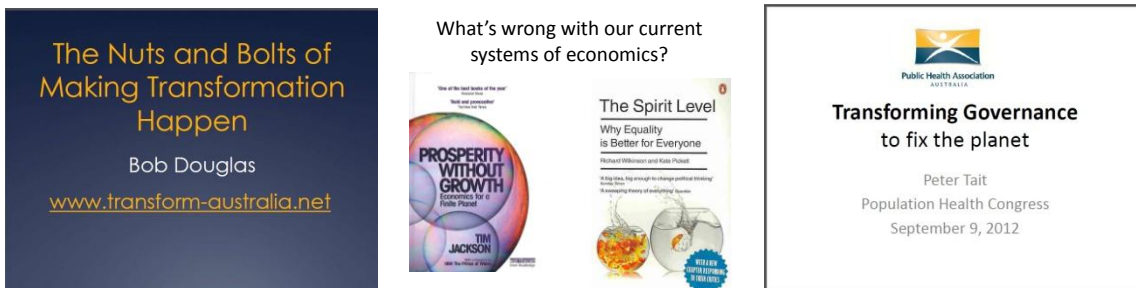
Background

This report provides an overview of this preconference workshop held in Adelaide on 9th September 2012 prior to the 2012 Population Health Congress and summarises feedback from participants.

The workshop was conceived by the authors as a way of stimulating discussion about the risks posed to health and sustainability associated with the current systems of economics and governance.

The workshop was intended to encourage a systems approach to public health; provide an overview of the movement for societal transformation occurring globally; and facilitate links between the transformation agenda and health professionals.

The authors gave brief presentations intended to encourage discussion among participants to explore the need for a transformation of our systems of economics and governance to recognise and support ecological sustainability and limits to growth.



The presentations are available here:

[Fiona Armstrong - Reshaping economics for better health and sustainability](#)

[Peter Tait - Transforming governance to fix the planet](#)

[Bob Douglas - The nuts and bolts of making transformation happen](#)

Workshop Discussion

Participants were asked to consider and respond to four questions:

1. What are the principle threats to health posed by the current political and economic systems?
2. What changes are required to address these?
3. What action can you take in your professional and or personal life to help transformation?
4. What is the most memorable take home message for you from today?

Key messages

Feedback from participants fell into three main themes:

1. Citizen engagement and democratic reform

- Reform is needed of the current systems of governance to increase accountability and strengthen democracy by enhancing citizen participation in societal decision-making
- There is a lack of genuine democracy and opportunities for individuals and the community to participate in decision making; and a governance system where economic growth and those with a vested interest in the status quo have a strong influence on decision making
- There is a need to build capacity and skills in the community to empower people to envision and pursue alternative futures (e.g. by creating and promoting a positive vision of the future; by building non-traditional alliances; through use of media and social media; by bringing older and younger people together) and enabling them to act without and despite government

2. Economics to reflect the true value of nature and human health and wellbeing

- There is an urgent need to incorporate environmental and health externalities into both economic and political systems (e.g. the development of new indicators to measure societal progress; greater consideration of Environmentally Sustainable Development in decision making; and the reflection of the value of ecosystem services and human health and wellbeing in national accounts)

3. Top down and bottom up action is needed - using a positive message to inspire change

- Governments and corporations need to be held to account and encouraged to demonstrate leadership and existing paradigms of continuous economic growth challenged
- There is a need to change our own 'mental infrastructure' to help envision what transformative change might look like in order to communicate this new vision in ways that build positive support and an appetite for reform

Workshop Findings

Participant feedback on each of the four discussion questions are summarised below.

Responses regarding **the principle threats posed to health from the current political and economic system** fell into three main themes:

- The prioritisation of economic growth and privileging of corporate profit is occurring at the expense of environmental sustainability and health outcomes, and there is a lack of accountability for environmental and health externalities in the current system
- Concerns about climate change, global food security, and peak oil, and their impact on systems that support health and security e.g. medical supply chains, sanitation and transportation as well as concerns regarding the impact of inaction on mental health

- The failure of democracy and sense of disempowerment among individuals to change the current system (e.g. because of disproportionate power, fear of unemployment or financial obligations like mortgages that make change risky) and overwhelming nature of the crisis

Participant's responses re **what changes are required to address the above issues** formed four main themes:

- Reform of the current governance system to increase accountability and citizen participation to prevent undue influence by corporations
- Incorporation of environmental and health externalities into both economic and political systems (e.g. emphasis on green GDP and accounting for ecosystem services; regulation to prevent harm and promote environmental protection; recognition of risks from peak oil)
- The need for top down and bottom up action simultaneously
- Building resilience, capacity and skills in the community to enable and empower people to pursue alternative futures (e.g. by creating hope through promoting a positive vision of the future, by building non-traditional alliances, through use of media and social media, by bringing older and younger people together, strengthening community relationships, through building and maintaining the social licence to protect the environment, and providing practical, descriptive and motivating visions of alternative futures)

Participants were then asked about **what actions are available to them in their professional and/or personal lives to help transformation**. Respondents offered a diverse range of suggestions, a summary of which is provided below:

- Thinking 'outside the box' to build new alliances and relationships and to engage with the community (e.g. through research dissemination, use of social media, community movements and engaging with people in both personal and professional lives, at work and in schools)
- Building alliances within the health community and communities of interest with shared values using a range of strategies to support each other and maintain pressure for change
- Creating opportunities through innovative development of students in Public Health and Environmental Health fields, drawing links between health and ecological consciousness and activism and highlighting importance of citizen engagement to protect health
- Holding government and decision makers accountable for truth and transparency in governance, and advocating for meaningful consultation and processes of engagement to empower communities
- Actively participating in decision making (e.g. through lobbying government) and demonstrating to others opportunities to participate and engage with these issues
- Sharing with others a positive vision for the future to promote the need for a paradigm shift

Finally, respondents were asked to share the most memorable message that they would take home from the workshop. There were **five main 'take-home' messages**:

- The importance of collaboration, collegiality and building alliances across sectors
- Participants felt reassured that they were not alone in their concerns and felt empowered by hearing about much inspirational work already being done in communities across Australia

- The need to think outside the box and look for entry and leverage points to begin transformative change through creating new intersectoral collaborative alliances
- The importance of scrutinising democracy and working to improve decision making processes
- The need to build capacity in people to enable them to take action, by communicating using hope, developing resilience, sharing skills and the building the necessary “mental infrastructure” to envision pathways to transformative actions

Summary

It is clear from this workshop that there is a realisation among public health professionals and others that there are serious and increasing risks to health that stem from a failure of our democratic system of governance to protect the interests of all citizens and from the current economic system that prioritises continuous growth without regard for ecological limits or the value of natural capital.

Concerns for health range from risk to healthcare systems from a global collapse in natural capital, causing economic disruption and threatening societal stability, through to the interruption of supply chains and risk from civil unrest.

There are significant challenges to reform of our systems of economics and governance, not least of which is associated with the power and economic resources of those with a vested interest in the status quo.

There is however recognition that transformative change to governance and economic systems is necessary and possible, and that significant change is already occurring at various levels of society, from global institutions such as the United Nations to local grassroots community actions.

There was a strong emphasis on the need to develop a positive narrative for change within the community and the health sector, recognising the importance of building resilient and supportive collaborative relationships across sectors to enable the empowerment of citizens to fully participate in democratic processes for reform, supported and inspired by demonstrable examples of transformative change to help build a mindset of possibility to create the framework for a new ‘ecocentrism’.

Next steps

A network for participants will be established following the workshop to enable participants to continue a dialogue about transformative change, the role of the health sector in responding and to share new initiatives consistent with the discussion outlined here.

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