

Towards a Human Future: Solving Energy and Money Barriers

by Chris Aikman

Recently, the World Economic Forum has raised some overarching questions as to how we can work together to grow the economy, protect the planet, optimize the use of technology for fairier outcomes and a better life for all global citizens. Yes, those a very big questions. What I'd like to suggest is that their solutions are not that far out of reach, in fact we can be on the verge of resolving them all.

When we look at the myriad of challenges and threats facing our world today, they really cluster around two main themes: money and energy. Since energy creates wealth, and wealth distribution is defined by how we use energy, these two issues meld together. If we solve one, the other will be largely solved. But in fact we can, and will, solve both faster by addressing them simultaneously.

The energy challenge arises because we now rely so heavily on chemical energy, and for reasons of basic chemistry, that means carbon-based energy. We remove hydrocarbons from the Earth's crust, and combust them, raising the greenhouse gas content of the atmosphere to dangerous levels. Actually, almost all our environmental challenges (such as agricultural and manufacturing processes) are governed by the cost of energy.

The money challenge centers around the fact that so much of the world's land and resources are owned by so few. The picture isn't all bad of course: more people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in recent decades than at any other time in history. But we should acknowledge though that if competition for the Earth's resources lies solely in the hands of a few ultra-wealthy individuals, corporations or governments, this will invite serious conflict. We need only to reflect on the concentration of wealth that preceded World War I to remind us just how dangerous such a situation can become.

Let's begin by looking at our home planet from outside, to obtain a truly global overview. The world is a closed system: very little enters our planet from beyond, and very little leaves its gravitational domain. That means every material thing on Earth is eventually recycled and reclaimable: we don't run out of anything. It requires only energy to let this recycling happen by human will, or by nature's own processes. And the Sun supplies us with enough solar energy to allow recycling of everything we need: that energy is no longer capital-intensive to harness, it's non-proprietary, and available to all, all over the globe, on a daily basis. In other words, we have all the material and energy resources needed to provide a high standard of living for every single person on Earth. Any failure to achieve this is a result of our own lack of planning.

The best way forward is to remove any trade and regulatory barriers for the harvesting of solar photovoltaic electricity. These barriers have been imposed by fossil fuel interests, whose vision of the future is clearly not sustainable.

If we all could afford to develop the solarPV energy at our homes, farms, factories and communities, almost all our environmental problems would become solvable. Simultaneously, economic inequalities would be returned to natural levels.

Our immediate goal should be to make solarPV energy affordable and accessible to all. This is achievable, and we should demand it from our governments, and from all trade agreements.

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