

**Tending the Green Shoots:
Building a narrative for Development fit for the 21st Century**

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[SLIDE 1]

Section One: Intro

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak today. I rarely speak in Europe these days, or to NGO campaigners, so this is a special treat for me. A sort of homecoming.

I'm going to start by telling a story. My story. I've only done this once before, in a setting like this. And the last time I did it because I was, quite honestly, lost and had little else to offer that I felt I could stand behind with confidence. I had lots of critiques and open questions but few coherent suggestions.

Looking back, and with the benefit of hindsight, I realise that one way to describe what was happening to make me feel lost was that the big narratives about how the world works that I used to believe were no longer making sense. Another way of saying it is that my worldview was changing, at a pretty fundamental level.

The narratives I'm talking about can be difficult to see. They are the ones that are so familiar and accepted that we often don't even acknowledge that they are there. They live in and inform all aspects of how we live. Most of the time, we don't even think of them as narratives. They just feel like the obvious, like common sense.

What narratives do I mean? Well, what started out for me as an investigation into the deep logic of how we understand and talk about global poverty has led me to some of the foundational narratives of our culture. What is an economy? What is progress? What makes a human life fulfilled and happy? What is our relationship to the earth? What are the meta-human-systems we call 'civilisations'? What rules govern their rise and fall?

None of this was a diversion from the original investigation into the narratives of poverty. It was a required path to unlearn and relearn my professional purpose and craft. There are any number of paths you could take, this was just mine.

It was a strange path to tread. It was destabilising, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. It created distance between me and many of my colleagues and friends. It sent my career spiralling off in unexpected directions, which put my own financial stability and future at stake.

But most importantly, it was that feeling of being lost for a while. That's something we don't really allow people to feel much in our line of work. It doesn't lend itself to job descriptions and campaign strategies. We like people to have practical solutions we can campaign for and implement, rather than questions we need to invest time in exploring. We give policy people some of this space, but rarely campaigners.

Thanks to some extraordinary privilege and luck, I was able to survive this period of being lost and stay employed, almost in this sector. To be honest, I had to take one step away. It felt like standing on a small boat in a stormy sea, the water swirling and churning beneath my feet, and me doing my best to keep moving forward, without really knowing what forward meant anymore.

And this is the first important point: This emotional experience is instructive of how narratives change.

They are not simply replaced overnight, one with another, like switching between TV channels. It is very often not an easy or painless process. It requires self-reflection and a willingness to BE lost. Because old narratives, and the old logics they contain, must first fracture or be fractured, lose their coherence. They must stop feeling like, 'common sense'.

This creates a vacuum; a cosmic and cognitive imperative that demands new narratives fill the space left. As the old saying goes, nature abhors a vacuum; they cannot exist long. Not being able to make sense of the world is one of the things we call madness, and so we are extremely efficient at making sense of patterns of information, finding the meaning in them. Narratives are those patterns of logic, put together into a coherent form. And when old narratives crack apart, new narratives can and will, because they must, grow to take their place.

Like the green shoots of life through dead, hard concrete. **[SLIDE 2]**

And so I am telling my story again, but this time with a sense of purpose. Not only because I am now only feeling half as lost as I was, but also because I know now why telling my story matters at moments such as this.

One thing I love is listening to storytellers. Particularly the storytellers of indigenous nations of North America where I now live. They are masters at it.

They say that one of the most powerful things we can do is speak from our own stories. Stand firm on the earth, and speak our truths, as we see them. The reason this is so important is that the personal is the starting point of integrity; the only fully authentic perch from which to speak. Everything else is a form of projection that can separate you from the deepest truth and values you hold.

This is generally true about storytelling, But if we had to speak our stories every time we spoke, we'd be in every meeting for days. I am indulging today because I expect some of my arguments to be pretty provocative for you, and it helps that you understand something of who I am when I make them. And to understand what sort of knowledge has informed them, if only so that you know where to go to rip them apart.

A quick definition to start with.

It will be helpful for our purposes today to be able to distinguish stories and narratives. There are long discussions we could have about this but for the sake of today, can I offer a definition to work with. . .

Can we say that stories are complete arcs, wholly visible to our conscious minds. A personal story, for example, that has a beginning, middle and end. It has characters, movement. It is usually quite linear in the way that cause and effect are caught in one complete and hopefully compelling package that goes from a start to a finish quite logically.

Narratives are more like arrangements of logic in a coherent form, and they usually reside, at least largely, in the subconscious. They are the deep, sense-making structures in our brains. They certainly can and do sometimes play out in linear A to B sequences, but they are also the bits of logic they contain.

Let me give you an example. A piece of logic that makes up our economic, and indeed cultural narrative is that growth is good. We've been told it so consistently for so long, it certainly has the feel of common sense.

We could make a story of it, by putting some characters, some movement, some cause and effect around it. For example:

Popeye used to be small and weak then he ate spinach and became big and strong; growth is good.

If we wanted to call Popeye a metaphor, it becomes about the logic of the economy. An economy without growth is small and weak. Grow and it gets big and strong.

But 'growth is good' can also stand alone as an essential logical component in the narrative that makes this system we live in - capitalism - feel like common sense.

Here's how you know this: if you don't believe that growth is good, you can't easily hold onto a belief in capitalism. It loses coherence. Because capitalism is a system that expresses the logic that growth is good. In fact, it is not overstating the case to say that capitalism is a system that exists to create growth. Specifically, growth in the supply of capital. The clue is in the name.

That is its #1 Rule. The Prime Directive, if you like, for any Stark Trek fans out there. Take growth away, and you no longer have capitalism. It is one vital piece of logic in the narrative, buried deep, as a logic many if not most of us received but have not tested fully. It is entwined with assumptions and emotions. Unless you are actively persuaded against it, it just feels like common sense.

So, stories are complete arcs of cause and effect in the conscious mind; narratives are coherent constructs of logic that provide meaning to the world, mostly in the subconscious.

This might be a point we can discuss later or in the masterclass tomorrow, but for now, back to personal stories.

Section 2: the personal 'learning journey' story

I have lived a travelling life. From being born in Kenya to growing up in Kuwait, to my professional life on planes and trains, to now living mostly in the US, a little bit in Costa Rica, not at all in the UK, much to my parent's displeasure.

[SLIDE 3]: Here are my parents. From them I get my roots.

[SLIDE 4]: Here's my fiancé. Look at that smile. His name is Kwame. He's a professor at Colorado University in Boulder, teaching ethnic studies. He's the most playful, sweet, smart and sometimes annoying person I know.

[SLIDE 5]: Here's our dog. His name is Magnus. He's just love on legs.

[SLIDE 6]: Here's my favourite walk. I always think I can feel the movement of the earth here. It's quite primal.

These are some of the intimate things in my life. The people, places and the dog that ground and root me.

Tomorrow, in the masterclass session, I am going to ask you all to share a picture or two from the intimate spaces of YOUR life. Something your work colleagues rarely if ever see. Something that brings you warmth, opens up your heart. I can't look at any of those pictures without my heart opening. They are the things that unleash the fullest possible spectrum of our my human capacities. Because they mean more to my heart than my head. They open up all my ways of knowing.

My childhood in Kuwait was very happy.

I was a terrible college student. I hated the lectures. The knowledge never felt very alive to me, and I got the grades to prove it.

Since college, I have been working in social justice activism in one form or another. I went from being a student activist, mostly on LGBT issues, to doing health promotion in North London. That became national HIV advocacy with the Terrence Higgins Trust which led, somewhat naturally, to international development work when I became Head of Global Advocacy for Save the Children. I then took on the Head of UK Campaigns job with Oxfam, which is where it all started to go either wrong or right, depending on how much you agree with me by the end of this talk.

I was 36 when I joined Oxfam in 2008. I was on a good career path, full of confidence. I wasn't a closet radical, harbouring any serious doubts about, well, anything professionally, really, other than my own capacities. It wasn't until I started looking at cognition, and the psychology of belief, that the old development stories began to fracture for me.

So let me walk you very briefly along the investigative path I've walked.

It started with cognitive linguistics. Preparing for the Oxfam job, I read a couple of books back to back– "The Political Mind" by George Lakoff and "The Political Brain" by Drew Westen. Both pointed to something I hadn't really put much thought into before – the science behind belief. Up until then I had lived in a world of policy papers, issuespecific research, and political power maps. Now I was looking at how the human brain process information to construct narratives that shape and give meaning to reality. It was quite the leap.

In 2009 I met Tom Crompton who was with WWF at the time and who had been on a similar journey, from a slightly different angle. Together with a few others, we developed the Frames and Values work. We wrote big, heavy reports, like Common Cause, and Finding Frames. We produced this sort of collaborative, heavy, quite academic output because that's how NGOs process big ideas in policy departments, which are the internal gold standard. After 4 years of doing that in Oxfam, I was exhausted and demoralised, feeling like I was hitting my head against a brick wall. And not really understanding why.

Then I met Alnoor Ladha, who is now my co-Founder at The Rules. He'd read our frames and values work and made me the irresistible offer of putting my money where my mouth was and setting up an organisation to put all that learning into practice. So I hopped on a plane to New York and off we went.

When I stepped off the plane at JFK in June 2012, at the not-so-tender age of 40, I knew plenty about what I didn't want us to do, but precious little about what we could offer instead.

What was quickly becoming apparent was that to work on the deep logics, on the narratives, you need different tools, skills sets and input than traditional campaigning. It can't be done just with organisers, policy-defined petitions, street marches and

lobbying. It is essentially a different discipline from advocacy campaigning. Where advocacy campaigning seeks to alter specific decisions by people in power, narrative campaigning tries to affect the logical context within which decisions are made.

From the cognitive lens of frames and values we moved onto the complexity sciences. I could bore you all day with why I think this is so vital, but for the sake of time I'll leave it to this: one of the things that we have got so wrong in the last few hundred years is believing the world is a machine. We can thank Descartes and the Enlightenment for this. For all the wonderful things it unleashed, it also locked us into this horrible and inaccurate metaphor: The World as Machine. This is simply wrong. The world is not a machine that has lots of individual parts, like a car, that can be taken apart, understood completely, and built up again. That can be 'fixed', or even 'broken' in the way a machine can be fixed.

The world is an infinitely complex, ever-adapting, ever-evolving system. What matters less is the individual parts than the relationships between them; the interconnections, the energy flows, the patterns, the movement, and the logic that movement articulates.

Logic that is captured in narratives.

From complexity to evolutionary biology. An extraordinary field, that tells us an enormous amount about why we do what we do. It shows us, for example, what role altruism plays, and why it is a central evolutionary force. It also helps in understand interconnections.

But I also needed to know more from the purely human perspective, so I looked to people like Joseph Tainter, Daniel Quinn and Jared Diamond on the rise and fall of civilisations. That took me back deep into human history, to the origins of agriculture and the early experiments with surplus production - i.e. making or growing more physical materials than required for immediate needs. One of the long threads of those experiments, that is the current chapter in this 10,000 year old story, is capitalism.

And then I hit pay dirt; a knowledge system that brought all the others together into an elegant, mind-bending package: the original instructions of the indigenous peoples of North America. Which shares a core worldview with many of the surviving indigenous cultures all around the world from the Aborigines of Australia to the Kogi of Peru. Indigenous wisdom, it is sometimes called. For all the variations there are, all the

different mythologies and cosmologies, there is a remarkably consistent core narrative they all share.

Everything I had learnt from the cognitive sciences, complexity and evolutionary biology – and indeed what I was learning on the separate track of my own spiritual work - was represented here. Not in the ways we Westerners can easily recognise, but in the metaphors and the deep logic of their cultural narratives.

Right at the burning heart of these narratives is the idea of interdependencies. And the most important, the most truthful, the most sacred of these interdependencies is that between humans and the world around us. Grandmother Nature, as she's sometimes called. The interconnection to beat all other interconnections. The truth of unity.

Let me just give you two quick examples of those narratives poking through into our world:

The communities at Standing Rock made a very strong and clear point to say, we are not protestors but protectors. That one little word shift could easily be passed over as if it were nothing. But it is, in truth, the tip of a whole other cosmology and approach to life. I'd encourage you, if you haven't already, to really look at the language that came out of Standing Rock. It should be a rich source of inspiration for us. If any of you were at Paris COP, you will also have seen this being said as "we are not protecting nature, we are nature fighting back." Interconnectedness.

Another example. The Navajo nation talk of coal as the "liver of the earth". **[SLIDE 7]** Let that sit in your mind for a moment. The liver of the earth.

That's what we call a systemic metaphor. What makes it a metaphor is that coal is not, obviously, an actual liver. Livers are fleshy things inside animal bodies. But coal is LIKE the liver for the earth.

What makes it systemic is that it immediately positions coal within a system of interconnectedness. We know instinctively that our livers are part of our body. We wouldn't need to think much to know that if we took away the liver, the rest of the body would soon die. Interconnectedness.

This is a metaphor that stands up to scientific scrutiny. Just as the liver serves to detoxify the body, coal serves to detoxify the environment. Formed over millions of years as

buried organic matter, subjected to intense heat and pressure, coal seams underground function as a giant filter, sequestering heavy metals and other toxins as water percolates through them. When coal is kept in the ground, it helps keep out water safe and clean. When it is mined and burned, toxins that accumulated over millions of years of filtration are released into the environment.

It took me 178 words to explain what the metaphor does instantly in your subconscious. You might not get all the detail from the metaphor but you get the most important point: coal is connected to everything else. To the very health of the planet. It is not an inert substance just waiting, dead, until humans found a use for it. It has a natural function in the earth, far beyond the energy burning it generates. When we frame coal as a dirty energy source, and ONLY a dirty energy source – which is practically the only way we frame it - we are underselling its true function and significance. We instruct our audiences to see as separate from everything else.

This is the World As Machine metaphor working its unhelpful magic on our logic. And it stand in stark contrast that with the interconnected system logic, with is carried in the Coal as Liver metaphor.

Of course, one metaphor is only as powerful as the broader narrative it lives within. That single metaphor alone won't switch people's opinions, but it's the right start. And, if you build a narrative from these sorts of metaphors, this language of interconnectedness, each metaphor starts to sing louder, more confidently. A choir is born. A choir that sings about the full living earth; the sweetness of its song is in its deep logic of balance and harmony. And, yes, interconnectedness.

OK, this has been bit of a winding path, and we're not landing squarely in our interest zone of international development campaigning yet. So let's bring it all together.

This is what I now believe: The International Development project is built on rotten foundations.

These foundations can be traced back through the current neoliberal surge , back through the oil crises of the 1970s, the post-colonial era of relative freedom for what we call developing countries; back through colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade, all the way back past the industrial revolution to the European Enlightenment and beyond. When you break down the narratives of poverty and development we tell today, and the

way we structure the development project from that narrative, we find DNA-like traces of all those past ages still at play.

This is why we are essentially still behaving like we believe rich people are morally superior to poor people. Or that the measure of a fulfilled life is how productive we are in the transactional marketplace. Or that there is one right way to live, and that way is our way. Our hyper-consumptive, market-fundamentalist way of life, lived in increasingly artificial, toxic bubbles.

The development project is one means by which we articulate and project this view.

Just to give a provocative example: the agenda around the 'empowerment' of women and girls. You'll see lots of education along western lines, and training to get women into the transactional marketplace as their path to freedom.

Just listen to how UN Women describes it:

"Investing in women's economic empowerment sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth. Women make enormous contributions to economies, whether in businesses, on farms, as entrepreneurs or employees, or by doing unpaid care work at home."

You can feel the values behind that statement. The will to help women. Which is wonderful. Please don't mistake anything I say next as criticising that instinct. What I am criticising is not the values or the intention, but the method.

This is essentially saying, women get freedom when they become successful capitalists. When they orient their lives around the transactional marketplace.

And it feels like common sense, right? Because at one level it is. To be successful *in this system*, you must perform according to the system's logic. As long as we are in this system, living our materially comfortable lives, it is the height of privilege to suggest others should not access the same safety and comforts. Quite right.

But what do we do when that system ALSO has the sort of fundamental problems ours has? As the British economist David Flemming put it,

"The only problem with capitalism is that it destroys the planet, and that it's based on growth. I mean apart for those two little details it's got a lot to be said in its favour".

I would argue that you have to have a limited view of what freedom can mean, and a withered imagination, to believe that this capitalist way of life is not just the only option, but the pinnacle of human achievement. The apex model. The one that everyone must subscribe to.

You ask the Zapatistas of Mexico, or the tribes at Standing Rock, or even the broad movement of peasant farmers represented by groups like La Via Campesina, and they will tell you, in one way or another, that the essential market-fundamentalist logic of capitalism is what they reject, what they want to be spared from.

Many North American first nations describe the essential element of western culture as *wetiko*.

Wetiko is an Algonquin word for a cannibalistic spirit that is driven by greed, excess and selfish consumption (in Ojibwa it is *windingo*, in Powhatan it is *wintiko*). It deludes its host into believing that cannibalizing the life-force of others - others in the broad sense, including animals and other forms of Gaian life - is a logical and morally upright way to live.

Wetiko short-circuits the individual's ability to see itself as an enmeshed and interdependent part of a balanced environment and raises the self-serving ego to supremacy. It is this false separation of self from nature that makes this cannibalism, rather than simple murder. It allows, indeed commands the infected entity to consume far more than it needs in a blind, murderous daze of self-aggrandizement. It is the ego unchained from reason and limits, acting with the malevolent logic of the cancer cell.

[SLIDE 8]

This image was painted in 2016 as part of a collective art-based campaign we did to see if this concept was meaningful to people. Gruesome, huh. Seems pretty spot on to me.

Wetiko can describe both the infection and the body infected; a person can be infected by *wetiko*, or, in cases where the infection is very advanced, *wetiko* can personify the disease; "a *wetiko*". This holds true for cultures and systems; all can be described as

being *wetiko* if they routinely manifest these traits. If you want to see a big *wetiko* in the wild, look to the White House. I've yet to come across a more perfect manifestation.

In his now classic book *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, Native American historian Jack Forbes describes how there was a commonly-held belief among many Indigenous communities that the European colonialists were so chronically and uniformly infected with *wetiko* that it must be a defining characteristic of the culture from which they came. Examining the history of these cultures, Forbes laments, "Tragically, the history of the world for the past 2,000 years is, in great part, the story of the epidemiology of the *wetiko* disease."

For Forbes, bringing his people into the *wetiko* culture is the very last thing they need. But that's the only answer we have for them. It's the only answer we have for people in the villages of Peru and the plains of Africa. It is the definition of a one-size-fits-all solution on a planet that craves and thrives on diversity.

So, if we stripped all the familiar development narrative and rhetoric away and looked at exactly where we are, how would we design a better 'development' agenda?

Well, there are several places we could start. We could start with values. We could start with outcomes. We could start with policies and process.

But I'm going to start with imperatives. The titanic forces bearing down on us that demand a fresh approach. That show up, in neon bright letters, just how very far from right our current models are. From there, we can start to sketch the outlines of a very different approach.

Section 3: The imperatives Our problem is complexity.

It's the perennial problem of many human civilisations. We just don't know when to stop, basically. We have very little sense of limit.

This is one of the swerves our culture took away from the indigenous cultures we talked about. Their sense of interconnectedness is so powerful, so deeply threaded into their worldviews, that the very idea of growing in ways that damage the fundamental workings of the environment is anathema. It is illogical; it just doesn't qualify as 'common sense'.

Not so us. Or many that have come before us. Ours really is a wetiko culture, built on the logic of endless expansion and domination. We don't see interconnectedness and the imperative for balance, we see opportunities to expand and dominate. And we build systems and technologies to do just that.

Many cultures have done this, from the Romans to the mighty Mayans to the Khmer of Asia. They all built systems – from administration to irrigation - that grew to be too complex for them to manage. That ended up collapsing because they were overstretched, became too expensive to sustain.

But we have taken this to new heights. What makes our age so very dangerous – so much more dangerous than any age that has come before – is that our system is now, for the first time, fully global . Which means that our problems are global. This brings them into the realm of existentialism.

Do you know that old analogy about the mind being like a wild elephant?

[SLIDE 9]

I came across it as a metaphor to help explain the tenets of Buddhism. It says, our conscious, rational brains are like a little monkey on top of a wild elephant. The monkey might feel like he's in control sometimes, when the elephant is calm and acting predictably, but when that elephant decides, as it inevitably will at some point, that it wants to do something different from the monkey, who's going to win? The elephant of course, It is far stronger, more powerful.

Well, when it comes to the economic system, we are like the little monkey. We think the economy serves us, and obeys our commands, but really it is a huge, steroid-fuelled hulk of an elephant, **[SLIDE 10]** with an 'expand and dominate' logic for life. This is the logic it grew its giant muscles on.

It's a logic that emerged from human minds, for sure, but an awful lot of them over a very long time period, so there is no such thing as an off switch in the present. No force that humans have complete power over comes close to being able to control the elephant of the economy in its current form, obeying its currently programmed logic for life.

We do, however, have the option to re-programme the logic.

The ultimate logic of any complex adaptive system is to survive and grow, in some form or other. Not always physically – we humans, for example,. Our bodies are complex adaptive systems, and they stop growing physically around ¼ of our way through life, if we live a natural lifespan. The rest of our growth is either just simply replacing old cells, which is more maintenance than growth, or actual growth that is intellectual, spiritual, emotional and social.

This is why we can make a distinction between growth and maturity. Right now, no such distinctions exist for the global economy. Growth means growth in its physical size. In fact, we have an economy programmed almost like a human body in a state of permanent puberty.

I'm going to take just one aspect of this programming to try and demonstrate why the situation is far more urgent, and far less under control than even WE think it is. And we're most definitely in the more globally aware, more alert camp, as human go.

I want to try and convince you to refocus a significant amount of your campaigning firepower on reprogramming the fundamental rules of the global economy. Which means reframing logics, which means changing narratives.

This means breaking with the SDG narrative of being on our way to eradicate poverty by 2030.

It means embracing post-capitalist logic.

It means reframing development away from being a project of largely targeted charity aimed at the poorest to a project to bring as much resilience as possible to the global system by moving to a wholly new set of economic models. Note the plural, models, not model. That's very important.

This does not mean that we need to move away from our focus on the poorest. Inequality is a great and profound destabiliser. Reducing inequality is a means of increasing systemic resilience. But we have to place it in a wholly new, larger frame and logic.

That's essentially the my core pitch. The rest of this speech is to provide context and support for this argument, and help to you listen as openly as possible, because what

I'm suggesting is not easy. It is a big shift from what you are doing now. It's a lot to ask of you. But, as I hope what I'm about to say will demonstrate, we're out of time for anything less.

OK, so, let's start here . . .

[SLIDE 11]: *"The greatest shortcoming of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function."* Al Bartlett.

[SLIDE 12] In mathematics, the exponential function is a function is $f(x) = b^x$

In graph form, it looks like this **[SLIDE 13]**

A simpler way of understanding is through a little story. **[SLIDE 14].** Bear me if you've heard this before; the theme carries.

Once upon a time there was a village with a beautiful pond. It was a thriving, healthy ecosystem, full of fish, snails, frogs and assorted aquatic flora. It was a major food source for the village. .

One day, a man arrived with a lily plant. He said to the villagers, this beautiful plant will look great sitting on top of you pond.

The villagers agreed. Let's put one in! So they did. A small leaf, with a little bud of a flower on it.

After about a week, one of the young villagers noticed something. The lily was growing, fast. It seemed to be doubling its size every week. What had started out as a little leaf in the corner was now a quite big leaf, covering about 1/8th of the pond's surface.

That night, the villagers met at their regular monthly council meeting. The young villager brought up the lily. The council heard her out and nodded their collective heads. Yes, we can see, this might become a problem at some point in the future. If the lily gets too big, it will cut off sunlight and oxygen to the water, which will cause havoc for our food supplies. Right now it is still small, but things grow,

"Young villager", they said, "look into this for us. Come back to us at our next meeting in 4 weeks with some better information on what our options are here". The young villager happily agreed. It sounded like a reasonable plan.

No-one paid much attention to the question after that. But before anyone realised what was happening, disaster struck. In just 3 weeks, the lily had covered the entire surface of the pond and started starving all the life beneath of sunlight and oxygen.

What the villagers hadn't counted on was the exponential function. If the leaf doubles its size every week, it takes a week to go from $1/8^{\text{th}}$ of the pond to a $1/4$; a week to go from $1/4$ to a $1/2$, and only one more week to go from covering $1/2$ of the pond to covering all of it.

What the exponential function tells us is that growth under certain circumstances is nonlinear. It doesn't follow a one-step followed by another-step path. It follows a one-step followed by two steps then 4 steps then 8 steps. Once growth hits an exponential curve, things start happening extremely quickly.

Now, let's talk about money.

But let's look at it through a different lens than normal. Let's think of it like this:

Money as a claim on future energy use.

Let me briefly explain.

All money creates the demand for more money.

There are three layers to this:

First, we have the interest-bearing nature of money. Every dollar, Yen and Euro in existence is, among other things, a promisory note, that must generate more of itself in order to be able to be paid back. Just think of your mortgage, or car loan, or credit card loan. Nothing is given free; it all has interest. You have to pay back more than you borrowed. That's as true for governments as it is for individuals. Whether they are creating money by creating it with central banks, or lending between governments. Everything comes with interest. So more must come in than went out.

What this means is that there is never enough money in existence to pay back all the debts owed.

That's an unbreakable requirement for growth right there. Unbreakable not only by norm and custom but by law. Everywhere.

It's interesting to note that we have cast off much of the wisdom of our own cultures in creating this system. Most spiritual traditions, including the Christian Bible, ban usury, which is the practice of lending with profit. I wonder why.

The 'everywhere' in that sentence is critically important. Because when we talk about growth what we're actually talking about is the growth of everything, everywhere, all the time.

It's not that some bits of the global economy are growing. That's not acceptable; it doesn't feed the elephant his steroids. Every country, every company, even every individual, has to grow their supply of capital, all the time. So we shouldn't really just call it just growth. We should call it "totalitarian growth"

Second, there is fractional reserve banking. I'm sure I don't need to explain this, but basically it allows banks to create credit in the form of bank deposits, That, to you and me, just feels like money. When you take out a mortgage, for example, the bank just creates the debt, literally out of thin air in your account, that you then have to pay back with your paycheck. The bank never actually lends you anything, they just create a theoretical debt and receive the payments on it – with interest, of course.

And here's something few people realise. There is no maximum amount that can be lent. There is a theoretical limit, but central banks have recently pursued an interest rate target to control bank issuance of credit indirectly so the ceiling implied by the money multiplier does not impose a limit on money creation in practice. There is actually no limit on the money supply. As I said a couple of moments ago, we are very bad with setting limits for ourselves.

Third, the fact that since Nixon left the gold standard in 1971, all the world's currencies are free floating – not tied to any physical asset. That means there is, again, nothing to stop the supply growing infinitely. There is no physical constraint. That's an enabler of exponential growth.

Put these things together, and you might expect there to have been an explosion of money in recent years. You'd be right:

[SLIDE 15: Global Money Supply]

This is data collected from 73 central banks.

Interesting, look what happens to the shape of that curve for the US, when you put in historical context. Exponential.

[SLIDE 17 – Money supply and debt]

So, we have the fact that however much money there is today, there must be more tomorrow just to oil the wheels of the economy.

That sets up the imperative for endless growth, firstly in the money supply, which requires growth in the overall size of economies.

The hulking, wild elephant must get bigger and stronger.

Then, add to that the final fact that every single good or service in our economy requires energy input in order to be produced. If I buy a cup of coffee with my \$1 bill, that \$1 bill represents, among other things, the energy that went into producing that coffee.

Add it all up and what we're left with is the fact that our economy is a heat engine.

The bigger it gets, the more heat it produces.

And here's that in graph form.

[SLIDE 17: GDP and energy use]

We should mention the idea of decoupling quickly here. There is a very active debate on whether it is possible to fully or partially decouple of the economy from greenhouse gas emissions. And there are some signs that that is happening. GDP and energy use are not so tightly correlated in recent years as they have been. But the hard research is quite categorical. Even relative, or partial, decoupling is a myth. Absolute decoupling, which is

what we actually need, is a full-blown fairy tale. We certainly cannot rest our hopes on either.

Now let's put this into real-world numbers.

The IMF says that we need to grow the global economy at around 3% annually just to keep it afloat. To add 3% of activity onto the 2015 economy meant the equivalent of adding the entire global economy of 1970 – all the cars and flights and products and services produced globally - on top of the 2015 economy. Just to keep it moving.

So let's put all that together:

The Prime Directive of the capitalist economy is to grow the supply of capital.

This Directive is written into the rules of money, and debt.

All money creates the demand for more money and, in the overleveraged, free-floating economy of today, more debt.

All money is a claim on the use of energy in the future.

So we can say that the explosion of the money supply, and the correlated rise in energy consumption, represent a looking glass into the future economy. The explosion in the size of the today's economy, with all the attached energy consumption, is but a foreshadowing of the explosion we are setting off in the size of the economy tomorrow.

And because we are on an exponential curve, we have to watch out not to behave like the town council. "Let's meet again in a month and see where we are". Except we say it slightly differently. We say it like this:

[SLIDE 18 and 19 SDG Growth target and GDP measure quote]

That's development speak for, "let's meet again in a month".

And before anyone says that renewables are coming on line and will change that equation, let me burst your bubble. We get excited because the news is full of innovations, like Elon Musk and his amazing new batteries. And we see lots of graphs like this, on solar usage.

[SLIDE 20: Solar uptake]

Looks great, right? But when you embed this in the larger picture, you see this:

[SLIDE 21 – global energy breakdown]

This is the IEAs projections of energy use up to 2040.

An interesting little aside, which may disprove a little of my argument – not totally by any means, but maybe a little – but shows exactly how bad we are at understanding the exponential function.

[SLIDE 22 –PV uptake predictions vs exponential curve]

This shows what was projected in terms of solar uptake, and what actually happened.

Even a group as august and with as many smart people and resources as the IEA gets it wrong. What we see here is that they have made the same miscalculation every two years since 2002. They've made the same mistake twelve times. They have underestimated the power of the exponential function twelve times. The only thing not exponential here is the learning curve.

I'm not arguing against the full weight of effort being put to dramatically upscale renewables. And we are actually fans of cryptocurrencies. In fact, at The Rules, we are in the middle of a campaign promoting the idea of a crypto-currency based Universal Basic Income. It has amazing narrative power and potential, which we can talk about later if you'd like. The point is, all that we are already doing with renewables must be done.

But let's not confuse positive moves with solutions. Renewables may offer a solution to 22nd century energy demand, and we should do everything humanly possible to support their development and roll-out, as an act of building for that 22nd century. But we've got to get through the 21st century first. And renewables can't solve this problem in that relatively short term.

So to return briefly to complexity.

I hope I've been able to show that we are not in control of the global economy. We are the little monkey on top of this steroid-fuelled elephant that is obeying a suicidal logic, much like the logic of the lily leaf, growing exponentially until it kills the life in the pond.

That suicidal logic is a logic into greater and greater complexity. Just think about fossil fuels. We're rapidly running out of easy-to-access to oil. We're now having to look at things like tar sands and fracking for natural gas. To get them requires more complicated, expensive methods. The process becomes more complex. That's just a micro-example of a meta-trend. In all ways, we are becoming more and more complex. And, I would argue, we long since past the point where we had any real control of events.

We cannot get it to stop, as long as it is programmed this way; with this capitalist Prime Directive of capital growth, everywhere, all the time, at all costs.

We have to change the logic it is programmed with.

This is the imperative that demands a wholly new development narrative.

Section 4: Recommendations

So what are we supposed to do about all this?

What we don't have time to explore today is all the other economic models that we have on offer. And there are plenty. Just recently, an old Oxfam colleague of mine, Kate Raworth, has written a fantastic book called Donut Economics, which will take you there. I recommend you read it. But she's far from the first. There's land based economics, post-growth economics, commons economics, de-growth economics, regenerative economics, complexity economics, all the Peer 2 Peer models. . . I could go on. Our problem isn't that we don't have options, it's that, as is always our problem, we're not convinced yet that we really, really need to.

Well, we really, really need to. Time is up for anything less.

Obviously what I'm advocating here isn't something the development industry can just do. Even if we had the massed ranks of the UN bodies and the IFIs with us, we have precious little traction in domestic politics anywhere, really. However much we wish they would almost no-one votes for a party's development agenda.

But we can contribute. The alternative is to resist. There is no middle ground.

So, as development professionals and campaigners, how can we work to bring our house in order?

Here are some steps I think we could take to re-orient the development narrative. On extremely important point to make before I get to this short list.

It is essential that we work on two things simultaneously – resistance and renewal.

Just as, when I feeling lost, I was both unsure what I was resisting any more, and unsure what I was working towards. Well, in one respect they are the same thing. Because what we're talking about is systemic change, so we are both resisting the spreading and deepening of the old system while simultaneously building the ideas and the physical reality of the new.

So these 5 recommendations should be seen as both resistance and renewal.

Underpinning it all is the new, more honest, more clear sighted, more accurate logic. And, of course, logics live in narratives, so from a campaigners point of view, a way to understand what this is doing is building the new narrative from its logical components.

So here we go:

1. Define the problem accurately. **[SLIDE 23]**

[Insert Irish "I wouldn't start from here" story.]

Our starting point is our understanding of the problem. If we don't see the problem clearly, our responses will always miss the mark. Right now, the development industry is stuck in a tired and inaccurate narrative that profoundly misrepresents both the nature and the scale of the challenges faced. Indeed, the UN *et al* are very keen on making the world believe we have both halved poverty since 1990 and, on the strength of this 'success', promise eradication by 2030. This is patently ridiculous; little better than a marketing lie. And yet the entire development industry backs this story.

Their claims rest on the shakiest of data: a poverty line that currently rests at \$1.90/day after controversial downward adjustments in recent years. Scholars agree that the \$1.90 figure we use right now is far too low to be meaningful, and that in order to achieve

even basic nutrition, infant survival, and normal life expectancy, people need at least \$7.40/day. If we measure global poverty at this level, we see that some 4.2 billion people, nearly 60% of humanity, are unable to secure the resources they need for basic survival. This number has increased since 1990, not decreased.

The same goes for hunger. The development industry tells us that hunger is down to only 700 million people. But the Food and Agricultural Organization admits that the core definition of hunger here is “too conservative to inform policy”. They suggest that a more accurate definition would show that hunger and malnutrition affects closer to 2.5 billion people. And again, the number is rising.

This may sound like a daunting challenge. The entire edifice of development is built on these foundations, after all, and such things do not change easily.

But there are signs that some in or at least close to mainstream are starting to notice. Just last week in her first major speech, Kate Osamor, the new Shadow Secretary of State for international Development in Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party said,

[SLIDE 24] *“We will never achieve the end of poverty if we don’t measure it accurately. We need a better poverty line.”*

A green shoot, to be nurtured and grown.

It is time to acknowledge the fact that the global economy is not working for the vast majority of humanity. Indeed, the per capita income gap between the rich countries of the North and the poor countries of the South has tripled since 1960, and continues to widen. Given the true scale of the problem, it is clear that if we want to eradicate poverty and reduce global inequality it will require more than just tweaking around the edges with a bit of aid here and there. It will require overhauling the rules of the global economy to make it fundamentally fairer.

2. Reframe the core mission [SLIDE 25]

At the heart of this framing should be the idea of the stability of the one global system.

At the moment, we tend to treat each unit in the development universe as, to a degree, discreet and stand-alone. Lots of silos. NGO, Governments, development banks, the tax haven system, civil society, education policy, humanitarian policy, climate adaptation,

etc., they are all seen and talked about as largely separate entities. The logic of the system keeps them there

For all the rhetoric, the SDGs still act as if 'the economy' is one thing, the environment another. They are intersectional, which is a huge leap forward from the MDGs, but they are not systemic. Truly systemic thinking could not ignore the question of growth.

Interestingly, if you want to compare the SDG language with really systemic language, put it alongside the Pope's Encyclical on climate change. Now that's got some powerful systemic logic.

It's a mission-critical flaw, that the SDGs don't manage that. Because unless we see, understand and can read the whole system, we misunderstand the elements that bind all those parts together, and the forces at play.

To put things simply, it must be recognised that the reason there are rising food prices in Kenya is the same reason there is massive deforestation in Indonesia, and, indeed, the same reason there is exploding student debt in places like the UK and then US: neoliberal capitalism. The global system is a neoliberal capitalist system. Even though there are non-capitalist elements within it, the rules of the whole abide by neoliberal capitalist logic. This is logic that has created poverty at the level we know it today. This is the logic that thrives on inequality. This is the logic that drives the environmental crises.

We have to name it. And we have to fracture the growth-at-all-costs logic of that system, and allow the vacuum to form so that better logics and narratives can emerge.

Waves and currents

3. Demand action on totalitarian growth and GDP, NOW [SLIDE 26] So you won't be surprised that recommendation 3 is that we must put question of totalitarian growth on the table, as a matter of urgency.

The leading-edge of this argument is GDP as a measure of progress. That needs to change. Have you heard that old saying, we measure what we value and value what we measure"? Well, GDP measures the size of the wild elephant, and it only wants to see it grow. As long as we are defining progress through GDP, we're screwed.

The mainstream political landscape shows few signs of being ready for this, but it is making an appearance at the edges, where all radical change starts. This is from a UNDP senior analyst:

[SLIDE 27] *"Setting a target to achieve 7 per cent GDP growth rate is a worthwhile objective, but this work will be in vain unless the way we measure growth is also revolutionized."*

I've hopefully demonstrated above, there is no real option but to figure out how to respond when growth reaches its limits. This time is coming faster than the general public realise, because of the exponential function, and there is every reason to expect that the world political system will not acknowledge absolutely forced to by circumstances. Because, of course, it is already too late to avoid the worst outcomes of unfettered, undifferentiated, ubiquitous economic growth.

Step up NGOs. If we can be the ones to help frame this conversation, it can be done through the lens of global stability and ensuring the poorest don't suffer beyond what is already inevitable. If we leave others to frame it, it will be done from the perspective of 'every nation for itself', which is the likely alternative if this is left much longer. America First, anyone?

But just as nationalism is on the rise around the world, we are also seeing glimmers of hope. Did anyone see this story from two weeks ago?

[SLIDE 28: Indy page]

The headline's interesting, but the really thrilling thing she said, to my mind, is this, in relation to GDP:

[SLIDE 29] *"The measures for us have to change. We need to make sure we are looking at people's ability to actually have a meaningful life, an enjoyable life, where their work is enough to survive and support their families."*

A green shoot, to be watered and grown.

A place to start on this front for development campaigners is, again, with the SDGs. It is absolutely essential that the cognitive dissonance represented in that document be confronted and exposed.

It's true that there are lots of wonderful objectives in the SDGs. It's true that it's the best we've got, and the process was so much more collaborative than the MDGs. And as this diagram shows, it makes so many good strides towards connecting things that were previously connected.

These things are all true. The SDGs are a huge leap forward from the MDGs, in terms of process, breadth of scope, inclusion. We all know that.

The problem is, we are treating the good things as glue that stick us to them. As if we had some duty. As if this were summer camp and it's important that everyone feels good about all the hard work they've done.

There is only one question that matters, now that we are on the exponential curve: are they enough? And on that score, because of their iron-clad devotion to growth, the answer is a clear and categorical NO.

The good they contain is entirely eclipsed by the systemic core logic they express. The SDGs are a neoliberal capitalist plan. They must be exposed and called out as that, and alternatives offered.

4. Move from false to real hope [SLIDE 30]

Any new framing must include, at its centre, the challenge of major disruption to the global system.

It is a mathematical certainty that there will be major disruption at some point in the next 20-50 years. The complexity of the system means it is impossible to predict with any certainty exactly how and when this will happen. But the food, energy and financial systems are the most vulnerable right now. And underpinning all them are ecosystems, and they are the 4th set of systems – and one meta-system – that are showing considerable signs of strain. I'm sure you all saw this report, recently out of Germany.

[SLIDE 31: Insect numbers collapse]

This was a particularly scary one, that got a day's worth of mainstream news coverage. Only a day, I suspect, because frankly it's hard to know what to do with these things.

So we can't know what disruptions will look like, but there is no doubt they are coming. And with just 5% chance, now, of staying below 2 degrees of warming, according to a recent study published in [Nature](#), and a likelihood that we'll get to at least 3.2 degrees, the prospects are dire. And, as is always the case, it will be the poorest who suffer first and most.

Climate adaptation and mitigation is not the right language. We can see what it means, just looking around us. It's adaptation within the existing paradigm; it contains no will to move to a new system.

Nor, frankly, is sustainability. The word sustainable has been so diluted and misused that, at this point, we should treat it as a problem. It sits squarely on top of capitalist logic. As the economist Charles Eisenstein puts it:

"If development equals growth, then "sustainable development" is an oxymoron. Poverty and ecocide are baked into the cake. It is time to transition to a world in which wealth no longer means more and more."

An oxymoron. A shiny bauble to keep us happy, while the machinery beneath grinds on regardless. It's the latest version of greenwashing, and it's coming from deep within our own industry. And being validated every time we use it.

The point is, we need to stop using the language of false solutions and false hope, and switch instead to the language of radical change and real hope.

False hope is that we can stop severe climate change, or promise no breakdowns in essential global systems, from food to energy to the ecosystem itself.

False hope is that we can sustain a global neoliberal capitalist system much longer, if that could even be classed as something to hope for.

False hope is that we can eradicate poverty by 2030. I don't care how well it tests in polls and focus groups. So does the idea that we can end cancer tomorrow. But it's just not true, and selling something that isn't true, just because people like it, is pretty much the definition of cynical inauthenticity.

There is plenty of real hope to be had, if we can just pry ourselves off the false hope.

Real hope starts with honesty.

Real hope lies in fostering independence from global markets.

Real hope lies in the reinvigoration of local economies, and the informal caring and sharing we all do naturally with each other but which has no recognised value in the marketplace.

Real hope lies in decentralizing technologies like the blockchain, which has the potential to transform power structures. And, when combined with ideas like a Universal Basic Income get us into whole new money systems.

Real hope lies in building new narratives based on intrinsic values and systemic metaphors

Real hope lies in all the knowledge we have about what makes worth living.

5. Embrace Indigenous narratives and leadership [SLIDE 32]

Here's an interesting fact. Indigenous peoples territory spans 24% of the earth's land surface but is home to 80% of its total biodiversity. This is not a coincidence.

There is so much inspiration for us in Indigenous narratives and non-formal leadership. The blindness the western world has to the sophistication of indigenous worldviews is one of the most poisonous vestiges of its colonial past.

It's really only a few decades ago that the west routinely assumed indigenous people were savages, far simpler than us, with our towering monuments and our earthshattering technology. When the truth is the reverse. The surviving indigenous cultures of this world are, in fact, far more sophisticated in their relationship with Grandmother Earth than we are. We can debate the how's and why's of that, but in this coming period, we are going to need the deep wisdom of land based people, who live within narratives of interconnection and who see one of their primary roles in life as protectors of Grandmother Nature. These ancient peoples have hundreds of generations of exactly the sort of experience and wisdom – and the narratives and language – we so desperately need.

We are not the experts we need. The evidence for that is all around us. It is OUR culture that has deprioritised life in service of capital. It is OUR culture that is taking this ripping this divine creation apart. Ours is the memory that goes back a handful of generations, if that, rather than then hundreds of generations of many indigenous culture. And by our culture, I mean capitalism. Which by no means suggests you are all ardent, happy capitalists. I'm finding there are fewer and fewer of those in every room I go into. But that the life we live is the capitalist life, and it evolved in our back yards, with the force of our social and financial contracts, so we must own it. It isn't our 'fault' in any simple sense, we didn't create it, but it came from our ancestors, it is propelled forward by our leaders, we are feeding it with our life choices, and, I'm afraid to say, we are powering the engine with our model of development. So yes, it is our culture, and we therefore have a duty to take responsibility for it.

How different is this framing than the usual development narrative of rich countries being desperately generous with their aid for poor countries?

There's a difference between power and force. Gandhi had power, the British Raj had force. We – our culture - use force and call it power. Our money is a force that we use, to dominate and direct. Our proximity to political decision making is a force that we use, to dominate and direct.

Indigenous people have power, in their knowledge and relationship with the ancestors, and our non-human relations. And if you think that relations is an odd word to use, I'd remind you that you share 50% of your DNA with bananas. 98% with chimps. You have to have a very limited sense of relationship to not see that all life on earth tracks back through the same lineage. We call it evolution, and we use the science-ness of it to actually separate ourselves from the non-human world. We describe ourselves as the apex species. We believe ourselves above, sent to dominate and control. IT is riven through the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But instead of saying we are evolutionarily connected, try out the word lineage in your mouth, see how it feels. We are of one family of life. The pain we all feel is the pain of the earth itself. It is our pain. At this extraordinary time in the planet's history, we need this language and logic of interconnectedness more than ever.

My own very personal view is that we need to find ways to surrender again to the mystery of life. This will help us work on this collective delusion that we can dominate our way to safety. That we can fix the machine of the earth. You can call it spiritual, you

can call it mystical, you can call it merely social, but it is the pre-requisite to the change we need. We must change and humble ourselves before we can think of being in service of those who know better how to live in this divine creation.

Or, perhaps another way to say this is, we should prepare ourselves for a humbling. Because Grandmother Nature is going to humble us. It is coming, fast.

Section 6: Wrap-up and Conclusion [SLIDE 33]

At The Rules, we start from 2 basic assumptions:

- All power rests on the ability to control language
- Humans make sense of the world through narratives

Put simply, she who controls and frames the narrative wins. If we cannot better master our language, we will always be pushing the rock up a very steep hill. Right now, the most important narratives – the core economic, political and cultural – are not framed by us. They were framed decades, if not centuries, and in some cases millennia ago. We are in permanent reactive mode. This is a position of defensiveness, which is a position of weakness. We are not winning. We know that, right? We're losing the war.

But, as we have seen with Kate Osamor and Jacinda Ardern, there are some green shoots breaking through the concrete of mainstream politics. I could point to many more.

The question we have to ask ourselves, as development campaigners is, are we tending the green shoots, or are we protecting the concrete? We can't do both.

We may never win. It may be impossible. The die may be cast. But even if the worst climate change and ecological collapse predictions come true, it is highly unlikely all of humanity will be lost.

What is inevitable is that however we survive, we will not be the global neoliberal capitalist society we are today. That is coming to an end, as surely as the era of growth is coming to an end. Because, as I said earlier, they amount to the same thing.

For today, let me leave with one thought:

Speech delivered by Martin Kirk during the CONCORD Learning & Exchange Forum 2017
8-9 November – Tallinn, Estonia

We are blessed. We are alive, on this planet, when it needs us most. We get to be protectors, when protection is so very valuable. We get to witness all the capacity of humanity – will we rise or will we fall? Never in human history has a generation faced this question, on this scale. We are the first. If we are not to be the last, we must throw off our reserve, our fear, our professional egos. There is only one task now: to change the logic of the operating system. The good and bad news is that it is going to change whether we like it or not; our job is to make it more rather than less likely that what emerges will be more equitable, more diverse, more human sized than the wild, monstrous elephant we are currently living with.

Thank you.