

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Too clever by half?

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Sunday, August 8th, 2021

“Humanity has outsmarted itself. With its ingenuity, this tribal ape has created a world its tribalism can’t manage. We know this...But the knowledge is not enough.” So began Martin Wolf in a recent [article](#) in the Financial Times following a meeting of the finance ministers of the G20 – one of the institutions created to improve global collaboration.

Wolf cites as evidence the collective response so far to the pandemic. Emerging from the pandemic as quickly as possible is the most immediate challenge we face. Given the global nature of the disease this will require vaccinating (and revaccinating if necessary) the entire world. However the shortfall in funding to achieve this is estimated to be around \$17bn – a large sum but relatively small and affordable given the need, the economic benefits of a speedy return to ‘normal’ and the funding already found to support economies as the pandemic struck.

This begs the question: if this level of funding can’t be found quickly to address such an immediate and obvious need, what are the chances of mobilising the resources and behavioural changes needed to address the longer term (but no less urgent) goal of achieving a just transition to net-zero?

Competition and collaboration has defined our evolution as a species. Competition has often stimulated improvement through innovation, which is then emulated by others. We succeeded in competing with other tribes by collaborating effectively within our own tribe to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. So we know what it takes to be collaborators on a relatively small scale, particularly when stimulated by an identifiable and immediate competitive threat. What will it take to scale this up to a global level?

Step one will be to explicitly recognise that when it comes to reducing carbon emissions, we are not competing against other tribes in a zero-sum game. Within the context of a much smaller human footprint on the planet this was often the nature of the competitive game, but the rules are changing. There might be some apparent short term financial or competitive advantage to be gained in delaying action, along with a temptation to free ride on the actions of others or seek a bolt-hole, but when the impact of our collective actions is tipping the balance of the entire global ecosystem there will eventually be nowhere to hide.

We can’t beat anyone in tackling climate change, we can only beat ourselves if we don’t. It could be the ultimate ‘tragedy of the commons’ if we ‘overgraze’ our atmosphere, when we know the consequences and we know what to do to prevent them. Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel Prize in 2009

for identifying the design principles of successful commons management from her research involving relatively small scale environments. These included clear communication, collective choice arrangements, effective monitoring, graduated sanctions and low cost, easy access dispute resolution processes. Can these be writ large?

The pandemic and climate change are not zero-sum games which one tribe can win by outsmarting or overwhelming others. It requires genuine co-operation to meet the shared interests of all the tribes to achieve a transition to net-zero that is as fair as possible, both within and between countries. Scotland's [Just Transition Commission](#) has called for a 'national mission based on collective endeavour', in reality what's needed is a global mission. The recent heatwaves and fires in North America and Russia alongside torrential rain and floods in Europe and China are graphic reminder of how climate change will affect all corners of the world and the urgency with which we need to act.

Martin Wolf concludes: "We live in a globalised world on a shared planet. Are we capable of acting upon the implications?" He is fearful of the answer. Mediators have the potential to play a vital role in helping move beyond a zero-sum mentality to build a more collaborative environment and achieve a more positive outcome. There is much that we can contribute from our knowledge, tools and experience to help different 'tribes' better understand their needs, concerns and interests and those of others, explore options for achieving a genuinely just transition, and take decisions and act in a way that will make a real difference.

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