

THE IN-TIME(S)

Inspired by the future,
rooted in the past, acting in
the present

Extracts based on the book "Inventing for the Sustainable Planet" - the inner and outer journey to sustainability.
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Article from the Future: The go-along society

By Stephen Hinton

In my quest to find out how a standard of living could be produced for all sustainably, that is efficiently and with minimum impact on the environment and health, I visited PORENA again. The country of PORENA abolished work as we know it some time ago after they realized paid work was actually fueling the development of a non-sustainable society. The whole system was threatening the environment, people's health and creating a society that was not pleasant to live in. Many people were actually "out of work" which was draining resources.

On the one hand, they set up strict rules for emissions of all kinds into the environment on the other they made housing, education, food etc. free. They also focused on producing a standard of living for all cheaply, environmentally and in a socially sound way. Removing the stress on the individual - meeting physiological needs - is at the heart of the PORENA way. How they managed this is still unclear to me, but to make a start I was invited to meet the management of the city of PORENA for an interview.

Hustled into a meeting room I was introduced to Aaron Heathcliffe and his team. Aaron is in his late 50's bearded, wearing a dark grey suit. He introduces me to the management team, who all work through a series of networks, I am given to understand.

ABOUT THE IN-TIME(S)

We are living at the peak of human achievement, but also at the peak of our resources. Sustainable development means handing over to future generations the possibility to create for themselves a standard of living at least equivalent to that we enjoy. This requires fundamentally re-thinking how we use resources, indeed all of the social arrangements we take for granted. And we need to start now. Ideation, imagining, even fantasizing are tools we can all use in this re-thinking process. The technique used to provide the basis of these extracts, Imagestreaming, opens up endless possibilities to explore our ideal future.

Everyone here is a volunteer on this a management team that looks after the overall running of affairs in the city. "None of us have to do this; we do it because we love it! We feel it is important, that we are OK at it and we want to do it," says Heathcliffe.

Accommodation is produced on a voluntary basis as well. Those who are on the housing production and maintenance network design build houses as they are needed.

"Remember, a house built to be energy efficient and built to last is highly cost effective. We use local techniques, local materials and design to suit local needs; - there is nothing radical about that." Heathcliffe also means that there are no secrets to clothing production either: "Clothing is the same as for shelter- local material, local fashions, local production - you make do with what you have locally."

The people of the city grow food everywhere. When they were looking into banishing paid work many had said "I have to go to work to put food on the table for my family". So they decided to remove this particular stress by building greenhouse extensions to living accommodation and grow food in public places.

Says Heathcliffe; “You have to grow food everywhere. Transportation costs are kept to a minimum. Another benefit of growing close to use is that you harvest just what you need and it keeps longer and waste is at a minimum.”

One real revolution can perhaps be seen in PORENA’s social system. Often described as “the just go along place,” removing paid jobs means anyone can go along and help out to their own abilities and interests. One factor, again related to removing stress, is that people need to feel a part of society. Obviously, when there are things to be done people like to pitch in together and help.

Another factor was that of health. By limiting the functions powered by fossil fuels to the ones that either saved lives or replaced damagingly heavy, monotonous or dangerous work, a lot of activities required muscle power. These provide an opportunity for useful, social exercise and promote health.

Says Heathcliffe: “your network marketing is good as it does not exclude everyone. That is really important for the way human beings function. This has been known throughout time, that inclusion is a powerful part of society, yet you use it and develop it far too little.”

Heathcliffe defends the PORENA model as being extremely efficient: “It is so easy to do anything we want– we have endless numbers of people available. Say we wanted to build another canal – we could do it tomorrow. Just put the word out we want to build a canal people would say ‘that’s cool’ ‘when can we come?’ You would have volunteers for everything from planning, designing, engineering and those who did the planning would be well into pitching into the physical digging as well.”

He often asks people to think about the kind of society they would like to live in:” Do you want a society that has to write complicated contracts, that says ‘we can only afford this number of people you can’t help out we don’t have the money to employ you we’ll do it on the cheap’. No-one wants to live in a society like that. Everyone wants to live in a society that says “We need a canal” and everyone goes “OK! We’re in” and then “Fine! What can you do? Where do you want to help out?”

They also take great pains to ensure the city is a great place to live in from other aspects. Very aware that the society I come from is addicted to short-term hits of happiness they are quick to point out that PORENA functions in more of natural rhythm. Says one of Heathcliffe’s managers; “Do you understand why we like this place? Life here is so cool!” We have such a good time. We are pointing out that the city breathes –awakens, projects happen, sleeps –depending on the time of year in a yearly cycle. As food is grown everywhere people are close to natural rhythms. People know when to sign up for activities as they come every year,”

Focus in PORENA is also on health, although I got some funny looks when I asked about health care. I get the explanation that they treat health more like a veterinarian would. People who work with health – it is their job to keep healthy people healthy. That means infrastructure, nutrition, shelter, security, not getting hurt and people not getting sick rather than actually “caring”. Health promotion and maintenance is what they work with. And I understand that this is a big part of standard of life production. It is far cheaper and easier to keep healthy people healthy than to treat sick people.

A set of people work with health in a network. You can have a health check anytime you like. And there are clinics available for all kinds of treatments.

The whole fabric of society is intended to be health promoting: people walk everywhere and use people power wherever feasible for tasks like digging and working on the fields and marshes and harvesting. That is physical work that is not too strenuous and it is muscle building and health promoting. And if you do not feel like doing it you do not have to. It is good to strain the muscles as a complement to walking. Muscles need to be challenged by pushing and pulling things. But it has to be done right. People need to learn how to do that.

And for carrying and transporting goods there is an array of carts to do the jobs.

My conclusions:

by starting simply from local conditions you can create a standard of living for all by:

- Removing stress from people – providing basic shelter, food and inclusion
- Including everyone in the production process.
- Limiting the need for fossil fuel to dangerous or life-saving tasks.
- Focusing on health promotion
- Following the natural rhythm of the day, season and year
- Removing money and all the costs associated with its handling

What can we take away from this meeting?

Is this feasible for our world? One thing quick research turns up is the lack of an agreed, sustainability oriented definition of standard of living. It may be that climatic and other conditions make it difficult to find a global comparison, although here again the UN have made a good start. One simple measure that could be done right away is for each country to define what it means by

a basic standard of living. They could then measure what percentage of the population was living at it, what it was costing, its environmental impact etc.

Reflections

But perhaps what is on many people's minds as they read about PORENA is how did they manage to get everyone on board? How did they get the whole society pulling in the same direction, and learned to let everyone into the various tasks and functions needed to run the place? That is a subject for later visits.