



Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

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Communicating tipping points is tough. The two chapters and four commentaries which follow cover the difficulties and the possibilities of using communications and media, as well as social networking, as a means for offering both the characteristics of convulsive change as well as the scope for telling the world about how to anticipate and to adapt. The real test, as Joe Smith (7.1) thoughtfully explains, is not to scare or to bore. In a world of constant bombardment, the possible dangers of ice melt, sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and human distress, even on a large scale, are easily lost in competing news stories, multiple distractions, the tedium of repetition, and the wish for peace and quiet.

The value of these contributions lies in their careful and intelligent approach to the ways in which good news can come out of possible threat and disruption. The power of this Part lies in the scope for anticipation and adaptation. This requires fresh approaches by the media as well as by governments and communities, as Emily Boyd (7.2) explains.

We need to say more about adaptation. In Chapter 2.1, Tim Lenton offers ways in which Earth-system tipping points may be addressed through early warnings. He especially points to the sluggishness of the manner in which a return to previous conditions following disturbance takes place, and the increasing randomness and unpredictability of reactions. This can be transported to the financial stage in the context of the capacity of banks to retain assets in the face of fluctuating stock markets and exchange rates as well as in increasingly demanding regulatory requirements for accessible capital to hedge against default or failure to bail out. In both cases there is a combination of randomness and sluggishness of response which is reminiscent of the early warnings scenarios.

(p.242) What Emily Boyd reveals is the need for reliable warning of possible hazard, the capacity for delivering community-based civil defence in the face of flood or storm, the back-up of contingency measures (food, medical supplies, evacuation arrangements), and, above all, the resources and organizational abilities to restore a viable economy and functioning infrastructure. This is her heartening story of Mumbai in the wake of devastating floods, a city which also responded remarkably to two terrorist attacks.

What we cannot be sure about is how well really impoverished and ephemeral settlements can cope with prolonged and devastating after-effects. The 400,000 homeless in Haiti following the earthquakes of 2009 suffer all manner of deprivations, including tropical storms and almost unimaginable public health and security dangers. Yet somehow they survive, even though the conditions of survival must be dire. And much also depends on a vital combination of continuing aid and extraordinary personal courage. How such people build resilience in the face of vulnerability is very much part of what we need to know more about, and to learn from. As Emily Boyd notes, we are good at dealing with the aftermath, but still very weak at anticipating and designing in resilience for the 'foremath'.

The two commentaries by Paul Brown (7.3), a former environmental correspondent to the *Guardian* newspaper, and Jonathan Sinclair-Wilson (7.5), a former managing editor of Earthscan Publications, offer important suggestions. Brown is keen for analysts of tipping points to be very clear as to their prognoses and interpretations, as there is little room for getting it wrong initially, even if eventually proven right. Sinclair-Wilson is equally keen to begin a dialogue of mutual respect and understanding, the essence of sustainability science, to begin the search for anticipatory solutions, no matter how clumsy. He also argues we should not try to skirt around planetary boundaries and social floors, but address head on the bonds which tie us to a uniquely habitable Earth and to our progeny. All value the scope for tipping points to reveal our inadequacies of preparedness, our powers of creating irreversibility, and our inherent scope for redemption.

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