

ENKELFÄHIG – BARTUBUNA¹

Sustainability, fairness, and entrepreneurship are three powerful values that may initially, to the average reader of this essay, invoke images of fair-trade, eco-friendly enterprises - think fair-trade coffee beans, underwater kelp farms that sequester carbon dioxide or zero-waste restaurants in Berlin-Mitte and New York City. However, in the context of a globally existential climate crisis, we cannot simply think about sustainability, fairness, and entrepreneurship from the perspective of the aspiring social entrepreneur in Germany or America. Rather, we must center the perspective of those people whose lives are most affected by how honestly, we are willing to hold ourselves accountable to these values.

The true story of the young German idealist August Engelhardt, provides a satirical parable for the perils of centering privileged, First World perspectives in the fight against climate change. Engelhardt traveled to the Bismarck Archipelago in 1902, then part of the German New Guinea colonial protectorate, to establish a utopia based on vegetarianism based on his own sustainable, fair, and entrepreneurial vision of society. He starts living a natural life on coconuts, attracts like minded community members and creates an enterprise selling coconut oil, using the labor of the indigenous population - an audacious endeavor that could easily fit into modern-day conceptions of sustainability-minded entrepreneurship.

Unsurprisingly, the consequences of the experiment are sobering: exploitation of the local populations and Engelhardt's own early death due to malnourishment.

In a time where 'greenwashing' of sustainable consumer products is trending on Instagram and TikTok and vegetarianism and veganism grow not only more popular in the West (10-15% of Americans today identify as vegan or vegetarian, up from 1% in 1994) but also acquire a patina of moral superiority, Engelhardt's story - indelibly colored by colonial and missionary history - has a particular resonance.

Climate change is undoubtedly a global existential challenge that ought to concern all of humanity. However, climate-interested actors today must ensure that sustainability efforts do not lightly sacrifice

¹ The term bartubuna is used in many contexts of the Tolai kinship that lives on the Bismarck Archipelago in Papua New Guinea. The term is used to refer to the relationship between children and their father's parents. Bartubuna are also the people who control property of the clan, including magic, ritual design and knowledge and land, some of which the children may want to use or acquire. People in this category are responsible for the children and grandchildren of the clan.

the 'few' for the 'many', without considering the personhoods and individual lives of the 'few'. For often, 'few' is not necessarily a numerical category but rather a label that masks unconscious biases, racism, and disparities in power and influence.

A prime example of this is net-zero carbon aspirations. Developing countries contribute 63% of emissions today, according to the Center for Global Development, and are under pressure to 'leapfrog' traditional 'dirty' energy such as coal and oil, to cleaner energy. This is obviously extremely costly, not just in terms of the costs of green energy technology but also in the foregone income and growth potential of natural resource deposits that are desperately needed to raise living standards for the world's poorest populations. Rich countries have gestured at providing funds and technical assistance to facilitate this transition, but commitments are slow to materialize, often come in-kind or with restrictive conditions, and are simply insufficient in volume.

When it comes to entrepreneurship, this conversation becomes even more important, but even less common. Aspiring entrepreneurs and venture capitalists typically pride themselves on being nimble, operating outside the usual slog of 'the system', with an ability to move-fast-and-break-things that is needed to save the world. They are well-intentioned, but their small size, nimbleness, and relative lack of public accountability can mean that they are insufficiently advised by community members and advocacy groups on the potential ramifications of their actions, outside of the perceived climate impact and returns on investment. In so doing, they may inadvertently dismantle local community infrastructure, distort hyper-local economies only to abandon them to collapse when funding runs out, or crowd out activities that may be better for overall community development.

It is true that the people who most need sustainable and fair entrepreneurship are the people in climate-vulnerable, least-developed settings. However, they need to be the entrepreneurs, not cogs in someone else's enterprise.

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), socially-minded or not, are critical contributors to some of the world's most climate-vulnerable populations. Entrepreneurship can help individuals, communities, and ultimately countries, attain the growth and wealth to adapt to climate change -- for example by moving to less flood-, fire-, or drought- affected areas -- as well as to fight climate change -- for example by funding green technology transitions through higher tax revenues generated by economic growth.

If we are truly interested in moving towards a fair climate transition, we must be willing to take a back seat and share the spotlight. Revolutionizing electric vehicles or battery technology are important parts of the fight against climate change, and entrepreneurship will certainly play a critical role in enabling the green transition. However, we must prioritize less sexy entrepreneurs as well - the small, mom-and-pop enterprises that may never provide technological spillovers or scale impressively, but are nonetheless critical partners in the sustainability movement.

Empathy, accountability, and selflessness must be at the center of the climate conversation if we are to save our planet for our grandchildren. These values must also be applied in an expansive sense to all stakeholders and particularly those who are the most vulnerable to climate change and have borne the biggest historical burdens of colonialism and oppression.

Kabakon, the island August Engelhardt 'bought', is part of modern-day Papua New Guinea, following multiple changes of 'ownership' by various colonial powers including Holland, Britain, Germany, and Australia. Today, 76% of Papua New Guinea's labor force, and 86% of its women labor force participants, are self-employed, primarily in micro and small enterprises. The residents of Kabakon and its sister islands in the Bismarck Archipelago are also staring down the barrel of forced relocation due to rising sea levels.

Entrepreneurship, especially on the micro- and small- scale, is incredibly challenging, as any entrepreneur will tell you. In many challenging contexts, entrepreneurship is a matter of necessity, not of choice. However, many micro-entrepreneurs describe a precious sense of freedom and capacity for self-determination that is virtually impossible to quantify. This dignity is what we owe the people of Kabakon, and all oppressed people of the world - the right to have a fair seat at the table to participate in determining the future of our shared planet, and of all our grandchildren.

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